WHEN LIFE WAS NEW

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LETTERS AND RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR WALTER SCOTT.
NATURE'S MOODS AND TENSES.
A SAGA OF THE "SUNBEAM"

WHEN LIFE WAS NEW

BY

HORACE G. HUTCHINSON

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I have to thank the Proprietors of the *Cornhill*, *Longmans'* and *Macmillan's Magazines*, respectively, for leave to re-print chapters of this volume.

H. G. H.

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WHEN LIFE WAS NEW

CHAPTER I

WHEN WE WERE BOYS

When we were boys we used to find no season of the year so trying as the weeks in which the field or lawn before the house was sacredly kept for mowing grass. We could see the finches fly down into it from one or other of the three great elm-trees which stood so proudly and threw over it such immense shadows. The finches would hover awhile, picking the seeds of the taller grass, then plump down, invisible, unapproachable.

We were forbidden to set foot upon this ground, sacred to the mower,—worse still, forbidden to throw a stone which might injure the scythe when the time came for cutting. We could hear all day the cry of the corn-crakes,—sometimes coming almost to our feet, as it

seemed, when we stood at the edge of this world which was "great taboo" to us—yet could not move a step in search of them; and at the next *crake* they would be yards and yards away in the sea of undulant grass. We would curiously watch the swallows skimming closely and swiftly over it, or the house-martins diving down from the nests which they built under the eaves of the house,—eaves carefully so placed, as it seemed to us, that from the top-storey windows we could touch the nests with two joints of a fishing-rod, yet could by no manner of means arrive at a plan by which we might look, or put our fingers, into them. The fate of Tantalus seems to be the continual portion of a boy. We used to hate these poor birds, who built their nests just out of the reach of our wicked little fingers, with the blind, unreasoning fury of baffled tyrants, and hurl epithets of boyish rage at the short white throat and tiny black bill that lay over the ridge of the mud-walled nest. Yet our hearts were tender enough to bring big lumps into our throats and an uncomfortable moisture into our eyes when one of our caged pets came to an untimely end. True, this might only have been selfish sorrow over our personal loss,—after all, there is a certain likeness between boys and human beings—but we have an idea that there was an admixture

of more noble, generous pity for the fate of something we had loved.

But if the season of keeping the mowing grass was one of trial to the flesh of boyhood, the season of the actual mowing was one of the purest delight. Early in the morning the cheery sound of the whetted scythes would awaken us to the knowledge that a busy day was before us. For it was needful that we should follow the steps of the mowers as they laid low wave upon wave of the juicy ripe-eared grass, that sighed to each sweep of the scythe like a wave falling on a level beach. It was needful that we should follow, for we could not tell but that each falling wave might reveal the late nest of a corn-crake or skylark, or a little mat of moss which held humble bees and combs with honey. There were others whose business it was to follow the scythe-strokes no less assiduously,—chaffinches and greenfinches coming to feast on the falling seeds of grass. They were tame at these times, not distinguishing the boy, fully armed with catapult and swan-shot, from the mower and his ordinary camp-following. It was a season of great opportunities. Nests of field mice were among the treasures which the mowing was likely to reveal. In some fields, of which we had heard, partridges' nests had been thus discovered; we had in our memories a

tragic story of the head of a partridge being taken sheer off, as she sat on her nest, by the stroke of the scythe, but such fortune never fell in our way. The swallows would come brushing past us, sweeping very low over the cut grass for the crowds of insects, invisible to us, which this convulsion of their world sent swarming into the air. They came so close that we almost seemed to feel the stir of their wings in the still summer air, and could distinctly hear the snap of their bills as they closed them on an insect. But though they flew so low, we might know better than to draw therefrom any evil augury for the weather, for the house-martins were flying high up above the tallest trees; and, above again, cutting bolder circles and almost lost in the radiance of the upper heaven, the swifts coursed screaming. Now and again the scythe of the mower, or his heavy foot, would send disaster into a nest of ants, and the active little creatures would appear carrying off to cool underground regions the cocoons which the hot sun would soon have baked. Boy-like, we loved to add to their discomfort, stirring up their piled hill with sticks, to watch their skurrying, until bites in tender portions of our legs told us that some of the out-pickets of the camp had found their way up our knickerbockers for their revenge. We did not care for the bites of the

black ants, but believed (on the strength of some groundless tradition) that the bites of the red ant were poisonous.

Over and over again we tried the experiment of burying in the ant-hill a box, with holes punctured in it, containing the body of some small dead thing, in the hope that the ants would pick it for us and leave us a perfect skeleton. We never found the results as they should have been. The ants left fur or feather or gristle, or something which would have been better away, and in trying to scrape these off we always brought the mechanism of slender bones to ruin. We made other experiments with the ants, however; assuredly the presumption of boys is beyond all limits. We constituted ourselves Heaven's executive and Nemesis on those wasps which we caught endeavouring to invade the hives of the bees. On no other wasps did we deal out so evil a fate, but these, in our boyish view of justice, seemed to deserve no better. We caught them with some trouble in small butterfly nets, greatly dreading the while the stings of the bees who might not recognise us as benefactors, and with yet greater trouble transferred them to an inverted glass with a sheet of cardboard across its mouth. In this glass prison we bore them, buzzing with furious anger, to the ant-hill, plumped glass and cardboard

firmly on the yielding substance of the hill, withdrew the cardboard, and watched events. The ants, thronging up from their disturbed passages, leaped upon the wasps like tigers. The wasps might buzz up to the top of the glass—it was no use; they did but bear with them three or four of their assailants, who did not cease to attack them tooth and nail. Five minutes was enough to settle it. In that space of time every wasp in the glass would have surrendered to numbers, been put to death, and dragged into hidden storehouses. The cruelty of it is sickening; it is as bad as bull-fighting. We are not sure that the fact of our discriminating, our presuming to act as instruments of justice, does not throw a worse light, as of a certain smug self-righteousness, over it all. It is good to have made confession of that episode of boyhood, that it may not have to be spoken of again.

The great haunt of our wasps was the stibbard tree which stood in the hedge dividing the lawn in front of the house from the kitchen garden. The stibbard is an early apple, earlier even, we think, than the quarantin, softer and not ruddy-faced like the quarantin, ripening rather with a golden glow, but very sweet and juicy. We loved the stibbards, and so did the wasps. It was not without peril from their

stings that we endeavoured to knock or shake down the stibbard that seemed to us most golden-ripe. Sometimes better than any on the tree would seem one which had fallen to the ground of its own mellowness; but we would never pick up such an one without first rolling it over with the foot, for often an apple that looked perfect from the one side might have a hole in the other, through which so many wasps had passed to eat out its juicy substance that beneath its seeming perfect skin it was more wasp than apple. In this case, on turning it over, the wasps would come tumbling out, bustling over each other and scarcely able to fly owing to the intoxicating effect on them of the apple-juice.

A little farther down the path which edged the lawn, and led past the stibbard tree, was a poplar of the more spreading, less steeple-like kind. It exuded a gummy humour, and around this tree for the sake, as we believed, of a certain sugariness in the gum, the wasps were always humming. One year it was much beset by hornets, so much so that we believed them to have a nest somewhere in the tree, but we never cared to climb it to examine closely. We had an enormous respect, exaggerated very likely, for a hornet. Three stings of a hornet, we had been told, would kill a man; and we were

always very ready to credit anything that had in it an element of awe or horror. The sting of a bee we dreaded too; there was always such a trouble in getting the sting out. We derived immense satisfaction from the consideration that with its sting the bee lost its life; but still that did not quite compensate us for the swelling and discomfort. Wasps stung us so frequently that after a while we grew to treat their stings with little attention. They grew to hurt less, as it seemed, and we believe in point of fact that one does become so inoculated that the poison loses much of its effect. Of course we should have wished that a wasp should die, like a bee, after stinging, but it was satisfactory to think that we could generally catch the rascal and execute him for ourselves. We tried various methods of taking wasps' nests, but naphtha was the means which we liked best. It stupefied them so completely that you might dig out the nest and have it perfect. If you dipped the nest into boiling water, you would then kill all the larvæ and nymphs, and if you were careful in picking them out afterwards could keep the nest as a not too highly smelling trophy. If you take the nest at night, as you should, it is not at all wise to wait till the next morning before dipping it into the scalding water. Our butler made this mistake, but only once. Authority looked with

grace upon our crusade against wasps' nests; had actually expressed some interest and some incredulity about our statement that more than one queen could generally be found in a nest; had finally even mentioned a wish to see a nest as it was when dug out, always under our guarantee that the wasps were thoroughly stupefied beyond prospect of present revival. There was no trouble in arranging this. The rag soaked in naphtha was duly thrust within the hole in the bank which was the outlet of the nest, a match was put to the rag, a sod was put over the hole. A little trouble might be given by a few laggard wasps returning home late, as they will on a warm, light night; but all who were in bed and asleep were perfectly unconscious and harmless when we removed the sod and dug them out.

It was a fine large nest, and we took special pains to remove it unbroken; then we enclosed it in a duster and triumphantly bore it into the presence of Authority. It was a quaint scene —boyhood, with all the dirt associated with the digging of a wasps' nest on itself and its worst clothes, blinking in the glare of the bright lights which were a startling contrast to the cool tones of the summer night, proudly unfolding a corner of the duster to exhibit our grimy prize to Authority in spotless evening attire, which it

withdrew with a rustling of the petticoats, and fearful apprehensions lest the insects should not be completely comatose. Authority showed a discreet and complimentary interest, but an interest which was quickly satisfied, and gave place to a desire that both boyhood, in its present condition, and wasps' nest in its present or any other condition, should be removed from its presence as soon as possible. Boyhood was told that it was much too late to be out of doors, and high time to leave off those dirty clothes and go to bed. This, as was well understood, was not to be taken as a special rebuke, for Authority very well knew that wasps' nests could not be taken except after sundown, and the taking of wasps' nests it considered a good work: it was only an expression of the general attitude of Authority towards boyhood, the attitude which has found its best-known illustration in the pointless joke of Punch, "Go and see what Tommy is doing, and tell him he mustn't." From Tommy's point of view there is no joke in it whatever.

Boyhood, however, retired with a glad sense of having done its duty, and the butler was summoned to remove the wasps' nest. He was a new butler who had lately come from London. He knew nothing about wasps' nests; he did not even know that wasps, according to the

Devonshire lingo, ought, properly speaking, to be called "appledranes." Nevertheless he ought to have known that it was his duty to do as he was told. He did not do so. He was told to take away the wasps' nest, and put it into scalding water immediately. Especial stress was laid upon that adverb *immediately;* but the stress did not communicate itself to the mind of the butler. He thought (a butler should never think) that it would be enough if the wasps' nest were put into the scalding water on the morrow morning. For the night, he put it into the pantry. He had quite forgotten about the wasps' nest when he opened the pantry-door the next morning, but was very quickly and pointedly reminded of it. The entire pantry was one angry buzz. Wasps swarming on the window panes shut out the light of day. Wasps angrily buzzing into the butler's face made him close his eyes and rush blindly away, pursued like Orestes, by a stream of Furies. Wasps stinging him ferociously in every vulnerable part might have suggested another classic simile, the shirt of Nessus. The butler knew nothing of these classic characters. Until the previous evening he had known nothing of wasps. Now, of a sudden he found his knowledge of them much too intimate. He was stung fearfully all over, as he reported, meaning, thereby, wherever

a wasp was able to reach his unprotected skin to sting it. The trouble did not end with the butler. The wasps, following him from the pantry, pervaded every room in the house. There were few members of that domestic circle who escaped being stung by them. In the end, the coachman, with his life in his hand and his person protected by the bridal arrangement of muslins in which he was accustomed to hive a swarm of bees, fought his way into the pantry bearing a pail of scalding water, in which he immersed the wasps' nest, and, opening the windows, allowed the survivors to fly forth into a homeless world. It was a tragic page in our boyhood's history, bearing in fiery characters the moral that one should always do as one is told. Of course, the brunt of the blame, as was but rational, fell upon the butler, who soon afterwards gave warning ; but a portion of it, as was but human, fell to the share of boyhood, with an injunction in strictest terms never again to bring a wasps' nest into the house.

We had great ambitions, which we never arrived at gratifying, to have the nests of some of these social insects (we did not much care which) under glass, so that we might make a study of their habits. Once we did go the length of digging up a bumble bees' nest, enclosing the whole mass of moss and comb

and hotly buzzing chestnut-coloured insects in a muslin bag and transferring it to a box which had been fitted with a glass back. We placed the box on the window-sill of the room in which were our birds, our white mice, skins, caterpillars, and all the other captives of our bows and spears. Then we withdrew the cork wherewith we had closed the entrance-hole, which we had intended to be the door of the hive. The bees so far availed themselves of it as to find their way out by this hole, but did not fulfil the second part of our intention, which was that they should return again by the same convenient passage. The faithless insects abandoned their home and their honeycomb, and we never set eyes on them again.

It was a sad disappointment. We had indulged in pleasant visions of beguiling the interminable hours of the hopelessly wet days, which were not uncommon in our western county, by watching the curious doings of the bees, and even had visions of their making for us vast stores of honey. In point of fact, the humble-bee (which is a more correct name for it than the homely "bumble") makes very little honey, sufficient only for the few individuals of which its societies are composed, and that little of a poor earthy flavour.

I have often speculated since, how long, by

the adult measurement of time, a wet day is to boyhood. Even a fine day was of measureless length, and the six weeks' summer holidays a virtual eternity, for their end was quite beyond the horizon of our mental view. But on the wet days,—the really hopeless ones on which the rooks knew that it was no good waiting for better times, and that they must just come out and chance colds and rheumatism if they meant to pick up any dinner—then, when the birds had been cleaned and tended, and the cotton-wool bed of the white mice renewed, and a few finishing touches put to the stuffed birds which were stiffening, with some supports, upon their twigs, then what had the day to offer? One could sit a whole half-hour or more over Wood's "Natural History" or "The Dog Crusoe," but even at the end of that great lapse of time there remained enormously long hours unconsumed. We would watch the cows munching steadily with heads turned away from the rain, confirming the presage of the rooks. Had it been going to clear they would have been clustered beneath the trees awaiting the fine weather, but they, like the rooks, knew that it was hopeless. Flattening our noses on the panes and watching the ceaseless drip was an entertainment which palled after five minutes. It was too wet even to go in search of food for the innumerable

caterpillars which we kept in boxes fronted with perforated zinc. The hours were very blank.

Happily there always remained the stable-loft. We mounted to it by a fixed ladder leading up to a little door through which a boy could pass almost without stooping. Inside it was dark and musty. The only light came through a little slit in the far wall, opposite which stood the chaff-cutting machine with the shoot down which the chaff slid into the harness-room. The bulk of the long low room was filled with bundles of hay, lying ready for the cutting. Around and behind these bundles were the most wondrous hiding-places, where an hour or two of a wet day might pass without dragging. For the secrecy appealed to our boyish reserve, and the darkness favoured visions of the imagination, while underneath we could hear the horses stamping and champing, the pigeons murmuring to each other in their cote on the back wall of the stables, and the pigs grunting and squealing in their own place. Unless chaff-cutting was going on, no one shared this dark, musty solitude with us, except the stable cats. Doubtless they caught abundance of mice in the loft, but our eyes, though they were sharp enough, could not see mice in that twilight; and though spiders, earwigs, beetles and many queer insects must have been constantly about us, we were

aware of nothing but an occasional "yellow underwing," who would rush with hurried flight from the place of concealment from which we had ousted him, immediately to disappear from our sight so soon as ever he settled again and closed the sober brown over-wings on the bright yellow of the nether. The yellow underwing was always an object of eager pursuit, though I had several of his kind in my collection of moths. We set a value on moths in some proportion to their size, and, common though he was, we found few bigger than the yellow underwing. Once we had caught two privet hawk-moths on the privet hedge around the elm-tree on which we put out our young jackdaws; but these were the only specimens of the hawk moth which we ever found. Of course I except the humming bird hawk-moth, which is a day-flier, and which we constantly caught as he poised, with wings moving at an invisible speed, to suck the honey from the heliotropes. We scarcely accounted him a real moth, any more than we did the gamma or the six-spot burnet, or any other of the daylight-loving moths. But there was a charm, a mystery and a fascination about going out into the dark warm summer night with a bull's-eye lantern and hawking with a butterfly net, whether around the ivy blossom in the right season or trees whose stems we had previously

anointed with a rich decoction of beer and sugar. In these latter visits there was a peculiar charm, and all the special excitement of the "stalk." For of course it would not do to go along with the eye of the lantern naked, as did Mr. Pickwick on a memorable occasion. The light would have alarmed the feasting moths at once, and we should not have found one waiting for us when we came to the anointed tree. The plan was to creep along, in stealth and darkness, until we had arrived at the very tree, then to fix the net below the familiar place on which we had hung the rag soaked in the sugared beer—and then turn on the lantern! The tipsy moths, hurriedly rushing from their feast of alcoholic sweets, went reeling down into the receptive net. A few escaped, like ghosts, over its edges, and, vanishing, left us with the impression that fishes leave with us when they break away, that they were rarer, choicer, larger, than any which had come into the net. And then began the hard and delicate work of transferring the moths into the somniferous fumes of the chloroform bottle, a task which was rarely effected without some harm to the delicate downy wings. It is through the sense of smell that old memories are most readily revived, and we cannot now smell the peculiar, hot flavour of a lighted lantern without recalling that odour of the sugared beer which

was so often associated with it, and fancying ourselves creeping, like Guy Fawkes, down the byways of the orchard, with the warm night airs playing upon us, and seeming to brush us with the invisible wings of ghostly moths.

It is a charming memory. There is in it an element of such sustained and progressive excitement, beginning with the delightful uncertainty whether there would be a moth at all about the rag; then, this uncertainty solved and satisfied, there remained yet to be seen their numbers and their kind; and this latter question could not be determined with any nicety out of doors by the lantern's shifty light, but must be the subject of further search in the pages of Morris's "British Moths." And so, when all the trees had been visited, we would go happily to bed and dream magnificent and magnifying dreams of the creatures who had gleamed down into the net when the lantern's light struck them off the trees, and were now sleeping a last sleep in the big-necked, chloroform-befumed bottles. We believe there would be the same delight in it even now, could we go back to it. It would at least be better than too much port-wine and tobacco.

When we became of age to have a dog, the delights of the stable-loft were not so peaceful. He was a fox-terrier, white and black and tan,

with one ear that cocked and one that drooped. Of course, his first proceeding was to dash behind the hay-bundles.. Then there was a skurry, a spit, and a swear, a further scamper over the floor, and the slit of a window by the chaff-cutting machine was momentarily darkened by the passage of a fleeing cat, gone as soon as seen, and leaving the dog jumping up with whines and yelps of disappointed eagerness at the window which had given it egress. It was trying for the dog, yet he never seemed to tire of the entertainment. It was perennially new to him.

Cats, however, were by no means his only quarry. From the tangle of the orchard hedge he would often drag out, with fury, a great round ball of leaves which examination showed to enclose a hedgehog, marvellously well protected by its spines from his attack. A full-grown hedgehog would last him half the day. After we had succeeded in calling him away, he would steal back, and from the house we would hear his cries of mingled rage and anguish, as he champed on the hard spines. After one of these encounters he would lie on the ground open-mouthed, and with his two forepaws pull spine after spine out of his lips and gums. Did the hedgehog miss the spines? A full-grown "hedgy-boar" (such was the local name for the

hedgehog) was too much for him. The old fellows can roll themselves so tightly that not one dog in twenty has the hardihood to search shrewdly enough with his muzzle to reach their unprotected under parts. The younger ones have not the power of rolling themselves so tightly, neither do their prickles grow so profusely, nor so steely-hard. Any dog of average courage will kill them, poor things, in no time.

Even as boys, however, we had no animosity against the hedgehogs. Their utterly passive attitude disarmed us. It is true we would urge Viper on to the wiry spines of a full-grown hedgehog; but from a young one, on which he was likely to be able to make his teeth fairly meet, we called him off, reproaching his cruelty. We have often wondered, since, whether Viper thought us illogical. We suspect he did, but believe that he understood us perfectly. He was a very loyal dog, always on our side rather than on that of Authority. Authority amused us often by endeavouring to interfere in our treatment of Viper. Viper was just as amused as we were. Everything that Authority said, of course, was perfectly true; but interference between a boy and his dog is like interference between husband and wife.

About once every fortnight Viper used to be lost. After some forty-eight hours he would

return, encrusted with dirt, red-eyed, weary. We upbraided him, but the zeal in rabbiting which had led him to these temporary entombments commanded our heartfelt respect. Once he caught a very small rabbit, and laid out its corpse triumphantly upon the drawing-room sofa. Neither we nor Viper could quite understand the disfavour with which Authority looked upon this grand achievement. They said it spoiled the sofa, but, even so (and it was not "so"), was not one small rabbit worth many sofas? It was most curious, the lack of sense of proportion in Authority.

If any one had ever taken the trouble to explain to us the relative financial values of rabbits and sofas, we should have understood the position, and would have entered into it at once. But this is just one of those things which Authority never does explain. It has never occurred to Authority to put itself into our position, or at once it must have seen that our interest in rabbits was immense, our interest in sofas *nil*, and therefore that the relative value of rabbits, as compared with sofas, was infinitely large in our eyes. But if Authority had taken the trouble to express sofas in terms of rabbits, pointing out to us that the price of a sofa would buy, say, four hundred grown rabbits, and goodness knows how many of the size that Viper had

slain, then we should at once have entered into the matter from the standpoint of Authority, for the financial argument appeals very strongly to a boy. Problems of finance afflict him more pressingly, as a rule, than any others, and he can grasp questions into which sixpences and shillings enter with a surprising avidity. It is not much use to talk to him in terms of sovereigns, for the sum is too big to be familiar, and only dazzles the brain by its magnitude. After all, the whole problem of education resolves itself into a question of the faculty to "put yourself in his place." Unfortunately, it is a faculty given to very, very few.

Viper had it. We cannot conceive how, otherwise, he could have been so successful as he was in catching moles. Very few dogs have the knack. In all our life we have known but four that were any good at it, and their methods were always the same. Very stealthily would they approach, attracted by the view of the dark line of molehills, or by the scent of the underground worker. Very slowly lifting each foot with separate thought and care, with many silent pauses in statuesque attitudes, they draw up to the little mounds. Once among them, the progress must be yet more studied and careful, the statuesque moments of longer duration. Gradually the attitude of stealthy advance is

changed for the collected crouching preparatory to a spring. Suddenly the dog leaps into the air like a salmon jumping from a pool. Like a salmon, too, the dog comes down again with a headlong dive. With wide-open jaws and paws together he lands, burying his muzzle in the ground where it heaved above the tunnelling mole, tearing away from the ground a great mouthful of moss and grass and earth, and amongst it all the little warm black body out of which he is shaking the life.

Or it may be that the little warm black body has altogether escaped him, so that his mouthful is nothing but vain, disgusting earth and moss. Then there is nothing for it but to shake the earth out of one's mouth, and to claw away with one's paws the grass, to spit out the moss, and to go away with head and tail depressed, hoping for better luck next time. It is no good going on digging and scratching; the mole is much quicker at that game; and the vain digging and scratching is the method of the other nine hundred and ninety-nine dogs out of a thousand who have not been given the excellent faculty of putting themselves in the mole's place. For without that indispensable gift, how was one to know that the mole would take fright and retreat at once into underground fortresses? How was one to know indeed that a little heaving of the

earth, like an earthquake in miniature, meant a mole at all, unless one had thought out the manner in which the black villain, sedulously digging, was likely to make his way beneath the soil?

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCING TOM CAUSEY

No doubt the greatest hero of our boyish, which is but a way of saying our hero-worshipping, days, was Tom Causey, rat and rabbit catcher in ordinary, and poacher of pheasants, salmon, and all else that came in his way on occasion. He lived in an isolated cottage, East the Water, as it was called—that is to say, across the river—with a wife, many ferrets, and a number of dogs, most of which, though well known in the neighbourhood for years, were regularly returned as pups under six months of age when the tax-collector paid his annual visit.

It was not, however, in his cottage, East the Water, that one commonly sought Causey for a business interview, for he was more often to be found at a familiar and more central haunt. Thither I repaired to seek him one evening, and was just in time to hear him concluding a twice-told homily on the danger of putting ferrets into the North Devon cliffs: "Us did put the verrets

into the cliffs wan time, and wan of mun valled over, but 'e wasn't drownded, vor 'e swum over to Lundy, and come 'ome in the skiff."

Now Lundy Island is a mere trifle of anything between twenty and twenty-five miles from the shore, at the point of which he was speaking. Causey concluded this terrific tale with an expression of countenance which was more than grave. It was fierce, extraordinarily fierce, so that not one of his auditors in the bar-parlour of the "Ring o' Bells," which is at the head of the town of Bidecombe, in Devon, dared show a smile on his face by way of hint that his credulity was insufficient to receive with gratitude so large an offering. I had come into the "Ring o' Bells" on a matter connected with the purchase of a certain "old vitchie verret," as Causey called it, which I could see even now stirring in the pocket of one of the immense tails of his ancient velveteen coat. "Vitchie verret" was Causey's name in the vernacular for a "fitch" or "fitchie" ferret, and "fitch" is just another name for "polecat"; indicating that this particular ferret was of the original dark polecat colour, almost of the hue of a sable, and not the pink-eyed albino. Thus I had come in for the recital of this tale, and hugged myself for my good fortune, while I crossed the parlour to sit beside Causey and talk of the ferret's merits in

a low voice, and see whether I could get him to abate a shilling off the price. The shilling was an affair of moment to a boy, and worth some bargaining; also, Tom Causey's conversation never failed to be informing; and, finally, there was the added joy that the very visit to a public-house, even one so reputable as the "Ring o' Bells," was a crime against Authority in itself.

Causey drew the ferret from his pocket, and petted it up against his great red cheek, while it nuzzled with its little nose in the frizzled ringlets which came down under his greasy felt hat. "A proper beauty 'e be, sure enough," Causey said, "and that gentle—there, a lady might carry 'un in 'er muff." "Is he game, though?" I asked, for these blandishing qualities are not of the essence of what is highest in ferret nature. "Game!" said Causey with scorn; "a proper tiger 'e be. I've seed this 'ere zame vitchie verret vor take 'old teu a great rat and shake the very life out of 'un, I have, very zame as 'e were a dogue." That was better. "And will he not lie up?" "I wouldn't be vor saying," Causey said, immensely candid, "as if there was a nest of young rabbits in the earth with 'un as 'e mightn't lie by a bit vor enjoy 'eeself like, as any verret would; but there!—lie up when 'twas a growed rabbit as 'e was a-tackling, why, I'll lay as yer'll

never know un deu no such thing till the days o' Kingdom Come."

In the face of that it seemed hard to think of bating the price of such an animal by a shilling. In fact, as I took the ferret and Causey the money I was made ashamed by his saying that it was "all the zame as giving of 'ee such a verret as that there vor take this money vor 'un."

Causey drank beer at intervals from a great quart pot as we struck the bargain; but his head had seemed clear to discuss its points and the merits of the ferret, so that I was surprised, when we left the "Ring o' Bells" together, Causey saying that he "was minded vor go 'ome early," to find his big body swaying on my little one like a man far gone. There is only one right way for a man to go from the "Ring o' Bells" to Bidecombe Bridge, and so across the water to where Causey lived, and that is the plain and simple way down Cold Harbour Lane. It is so steep that if Causey had lain on the ground he would have rolled down it to the bottom. Instead of that, though he rolled quite enough, he did it on his two feet, and, for all I could do, they insisted on taking him round by Market Street and High Street, and so along the quay. The greater distance was nothing, but what was something was that kind of Carfax where the High Street went to the quay, the

outlook place which Hutchings the policeman always occupied. It gave him points of view four ways, and every policeman in succession took his natural post there. The last man in the world that Causey ought to meet in his present state was Hutchings. So I tugged and pushed at his great carcase to make it go any other way; but it was like a dinghy trying to push a schooner, especially as all the ways were downhill ways, and he went heaving and yawing, with me vainly trying to steady him, down the High Street, straight on to his fate. Some kind of desperation had hold of him, so that he would not even let himself be guided to the far side of the road from the policeman, but must come bearing right down on to him, blundering actually up against him. It was no place for me then any more, and I steered off out of danger and listened.

Joshua Hutchings was a man with a feeling heart for the sinner. Causey, besides, was big enough to be dangerous. I heard him say, "Oh Lord, Tom! there yeu be again—obstreperous. Well, over the quay-head yeu will go, an' be drownded, zure enough. I'll ' ave vor tak 'ee to the lock-up, 'ees fai' I will, vor your awn zake like."

I could see under the dim gas lamps, immense novelty and splendour of Bidecombe of that era,

Causey clinging about the policeman with maudlin affection rather than natural hostility. The affection was just as bad for Hutchings as the more normal condition would have been. I heard Causey, with a thick incoherence, begging to be taken to his own house rather than the police cell, undertaking that he would go along quiet, so he would, sure enough, if only Joshua was to take him home, and more than hinting that the walk would not be nearly such a pleasant one if it had to finish in the lock-up. I daresay Joshua Hutchings's motives were mixed in the course he took finally, for Causey left no motive without appeal; but the last thing I saw, following at a discreet distance, was Hutchings leading him over the bridge, by which I knew that Causey had won his case, and was being taken home, not to the cell, and Causey seeming to redeem his pledge and going, in spite of his natural lurchings, quietly.

We were busy the next day or two, making trial of that famous fitchie ferret, and consequently not well posted in the local news, or should have heard sooner of big events happening, of which Joe first told us saying:

"They've a-got th' old Tom Causey this wance—they 'ave, zure enough."

"How got him?"

"Well, they baint a-got 'ee, but they've a-got

th' old spud of 'un, what he left be'ind when he'd mos' broke the young veller's leg with un."

All this was enigmatic, but it is the way stories are told in Devon—in pieces, like puzzles which you have to fit together, and as a rule they hand you the last piece first. The "young fellow" whose leg had been "almost broke" was Squire Hyde's under keeper, and the way it had happened was that the keepers had heard someone moving in the coverts by night, got a sight of the man, kept him in sight while he brought down a roosting pheasant off a tree—they thought it was a catapult that he brought it down with, but would not swear to that engine—then they tried to close on him, but he saw them or heard them and got a bit of a start. The head keeper, an old man, did not make much of the pursuit, but the young fellow, slim and active, caught the poacher up, and by his own showing was going for his throat when the poacher cracked him over the shin with a great stick. "An' off 'e goes again, and the young veller not over and above minded vor foller after 'un, 'cos the leg of 'un was purty nigh broke, and besides he'd seed purty well by that there who 'twas—th' old Tom Causey. An' what's more, when 'e caught the young veller over the shin the stick come right away out of 'ees 'and, so as they found 'un afterwards, and there 'twas, th' old

blackthorn stick, same as he always 'ath along wi' 'un. Yeu know 'un, master, that there wi' the spud to the end of 'un for diggee out verrets." Of course I knew it well.

"Zo the warrant's out against 'un, and 'ath been served on 'un, and th' old Tom'll be up bevoor th' bench a fortnight come Teusday."

This was news of import and stood the light of examination better than most of its kind. In its salient points it was confirmed. Even Causey had nothing to say against most of them. He had been served with the summons. He had lost his spud when he was ferreting "up along that way" in the afternoon; some "poachin' rascal" must have picked it up and taken it along. But the most salient point in the whole story, as it was told by the keepers of Squire Hyde and had found credence enough for a warrant to be issued on it, he contradicted in the most clear terms. It could not have been Causey that was in Squire Hyde's woods that evening, for the plain reason that no man, "'specially a man o' my zize," as he said, can be in two places at once, and "'tis plain for zure as I couldn't a-been in th' old Squire 'Yde's coverts, 'cos I wass 'ome teu bed."

Asked whom he would find to give evidence to that effect, in the event of the bench showing such poor judgment as to prefer the evidence

of the young fellow with the cracked shin to his, Causey replied readily that his wife would give evidence. Rimehouse, the river watcher, and naturally on the side of authority against the poacher, bearing a personal grudge against Causey beside, muttered that he supposed she'd give evidence to anything; but no one paid much attention to Rimehouse because he was a South Devon man.

We tried to persuade Causey to have the services of young Frant, the lawyer who always opposed the magistrate's clerk on principle, because he belonged to the rival firm in the town and considered he ought to be clerk instead; but Causey said he would conduct his own case. He was big with mystery about it all, giving dark hints and obscure answers when questioned about the line of his defence. But of course the idea of defence was not taken seriously. There was the spud, and the young keeper was confident of his identification. For all that the case was opened in a crowded court with a strong smell of velveteen and corduroy.

The young fellow with the cracked shin was chief witness for the prosecution, and gave his evidence on the lines expected. When he had done Causey was asked by the bench whether he would put him any questions.

"I'd like vor ask 'un this yer," said Causey.

"'Ow wass it when yeu come within vive yards o' me, as yeu'm zaying yeu did—supposin' as it wass me—'ow wass it, when yeu wass come so near as that there, as you couldn't say for zure whether 'twas a catapult or no as I vired with at the pheasant? 'Adn't been drinkin', 'ad 'ee?"

The young man was virtuously taken aback by the idea. Drinking! No. Had drunk nothing. It was a main dark night, and at five yards (or it may have been six or seven—the bench would understand that it was difficult to be accurate to a yard or two—"Quite so," from the Chairman—in the circumstances) it was easy to be mistaken.

"Be yeu sartain as 'twas any less nor vive-and-twenty yards?" Causey asked.

"Ees, I be sartain zure."

"Be 'ee now? It mus' 'ave been a terrible dark night, zure enough. Zo 'appened," he added, with an immense innocence, at which the court, including the bench, laughed freely, "as I wass 'ome that night."

"Ees 'twas," said the young man, a little mugged in the head by the laughter, which seemed to be against him—"terrible dark."

Then he heaved a sigh of heavy relief on permission given to leave the box, the opinion of the court being that Causey "'adn't a-made very much of 'un."

Causey's own first witness was Mrs. Causey, whom he spoke of as "the old 'oman," and could not be prevailed on by any means to use any other designation for her. Her evidence was to the effect that Causey had come in "in a terrible takin', zure enough," in the afternoon before the night on which the poaching had been done, saying that he had lost his spud somewhere up among the gorse where he had been ferreting. "An' didn't I tell 'ee, teu, as I'd seed a terrible poachin'-like rascal of a veller hangin' about, and made no doubt at all as 'twas 'e as 'ad a-taken 'un?" This was Causey's suggestion to his lady, and perhaps there are courts of law in which suggestion in this form put into a witness's mouth would not have been permitted; but there was no objection made in Bidecombe court, even though the magistrate's clerk was supposed to be against Causey. The fact was that North Devon had acquired the habit of taking Causey as a joke, and there did not seem a serious element in all this defence. The bench thought that they and the accused and the witnesses and all understood each other perfectly; the only question really in their minds was the penalty to be imposed. Among the things that were understood was the fact that Mrs. Causey's evidence could not be taken seriously when she spoke for her husband. And what gave force to

this was that Causey did not even go through the form of asking her whether he had been at home that night. He let her go out of the box as soon as her evidence about the spud was given. It was supposed that that was the end, and the Chairman, thinking it was so, got on his legs to ask Causey, as a matter of form, before the bench considered their finding, whether he had any more witnesses to call. Causey surprised all the court by answering, "Ees fai' I 'ave. I calls Joshua 'Utchings."

It seemed so good a joke that Causey should call the policeman, of all men, to speak on his behalf that the court received it in a surprised silence for a moment, and when it recovered from the surprise it went into universal laughter, during which Hutchings, most badly surprised of all, got into the box and kissed the book, mumbling, "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God," after the clerk. But the court grew deadly silent then to hear Causey's questions.

"Do yeu mind wan night teu or dree weeks back as I 'appened fer meet 'ee teu the bottom of th' 'Igh Street, and yeu wass so gude as vor come 'ome 'long o' me?"

"Ees fai', I mind it well, Thomas, tho' I be main surprised as you're willing fer call it up teu mind in open coort."

"Be 'ee surprised, then? Why be 'ee surprised, Joshua?"

"Zeeing the condition as yeu wass in, Thomas."

"Condition then! What be yeu meaning?"

"I be meanin' this then, Tom Causey, as yeu'm minded fer to 'ave it. It baint the vurst time by many as I've seed 'ee in liquor, but I'm blamed if I ever did zee 'ee zo var gone like as yeu wass that night. There now, I wouldn't 'ave told upon 'ee in open coort if so be as yeu 'adn't a-vorced it out."

"Wass I that bad zure enough, Joshua?"

"Ees fai', Tom, yeu wass that. I seed 'ee 'ome, and I gave 'ee over to Mrs. Causey, and I says 'Yeu mind 'un well, Mrs. Causey,' I says. And 'er says to me, 'Thank'ee kindly, Mr. 'Utchings, for bringin' o' my poor Tom 'ome. Oh lor'!' 'er says, 'twill take 'ee the best part o' teu days,' 'er says, 'fer 'ee vor sleep off this yer,' 'er says."

The policeman waxed warm and eloquent.

"Teu days vor sleep it off," Tom Causey repeated in a hang-dog penitence; "wass I that bad zure enough?"

"Ees fai' yeu wass, Tom," said the policeman.

"And what date was that 'ere day?" Causey asked the question with a *dégagé* air, of which he increased the effect by sitting down as Hutchings

said, "I can tell 'ee in a minute," and began licking his thumb to turn the pages of a big black note-book which he brought from his pocket.

To me, a boy, listening in court, all eyes and ears and admiration, there was not much meaning attached to the date when the policeman did produce it. "November 15, Thursday."

"An' what day wass it?" Causey asked, standing up again with a sort of not-taking-much-interest-in-what-was-going-on air about him—"what day wass it as this 'ere poachin' rascal 'it the poor young veller across the shins in Squire 'Yde's woods?" Causey addressed this question to the court generally, and every one in court knowing the answer as well as Causey knew it himself, half the court shouted together, "November 15, Thursday." And then about a quarter of the court, taking the point, went into a guffaw of broad laughter, sternly repressed.

Joshua Hutchings went out of the box, and Causey took up his parable, beginning in the tone of the penitent sinner as he addressed himself to the bench.

"I be afeared, gen'l'men, as it be treu as I'd a-took a drop teu much—that vexed I were, as th' old 'oman 'ath a-told 'ee, vor lose that there spud, as wass a prime favourite, an' I'd be obliged to 'e vor make order as 'e shall be give back teu me zo zoon as the coort rises. Well, there 'tis—

I'd a-took a drop extra-like, an', mos' unfort'nit, I come 'pon Josh 'Utchings, an' 'e, minded vor deu ees duty as a Christian man, zees me 'ome, an' th' old 'oman, 'er says to 'un, 'Well, there, 'twill take 'e teu days, an' zo 'twill, vor sleep off this yer.' An' Josh, 'e wass minded zame way. So there 'tis—an' this yer young veller, what I aren't got no quarrel wi', 'e zees a veller i' the dark, zame night, i' th' old Squire 'Yde's woods, and the veller catches 'un a great crack over the shins wi' a stick, an' the stick flies out o' the 'and of 'un, an' when they come vor pick'ee up 'tis that there zame spud as I'd a-lost zame arternoon. An' wi' that 'e puts teu and teu together an' 'e makes vive out of mun, 'e does, vor 'e zays as 'twas me as wass in th' old Squire 'Yde's woods and catched 'un the crack across the shins, vor all 'twas a terrible dark night, as the young veller zaid 'eeself, zo as 'e couldn't zee at no more'n vive yards whether the veller was catapulting down the pheasant or 'ow 'e wass knocking of 'un down, an' me the while laid by in bed, as Josh 'Utchings 'ave a-told 'e, an' not like vor be able to rise from 'un vor teu days. So there 'tis, an' if yeu gen'l'men on the bench be gwine vor zay as a man what wass brought 'ome blind drunk to ees 'ouse at nine o'clock could be knockin' down of the pheasants, let alone o' the keepers, in Squire 'Yde's woods, vive mile away,

avoor eleven, why, all I'm minded vor tell 'e is as yeu'm better informed nor what I be 'bout 'ow the drink takes a man when it's got a hold of 'un."

Causey sat down, and the bench left the court to deliberate in private. Then Mr. Vine, landlord of the "Ring o' Bells," sitting two forms in front of me in court, turned round and asked in a thick whisper, "Wasn't that there the zame evening as yeu come into the 'Ring o' Bells' vor ze Tom 'bout buying a vitchie verret?"

"Yes," I said, "it was."

"An' didn't zeem to me," Mr. Vine went on, "as Tom wass so var gone as all this yer, time yeu wass talking and making a bargain like."

"That he did not, Mr. Vine," I said. "It seemed to take him all suddenly as soon as we got out into the street." And then I told him how I had by no means been able to induce Causey to go down the straight and natural way by Cold Harbour Lane, but he must needs go round by the High Street and so run foul of Hutchings, going right out of his way to do it, as if his destiny had hold of him. Then Mr. Vine, who was one of those big fat men who shake all over when they laugh, like a jelly when the servant brings it in to table, began to wobble. "That there Tom!" he said with admiration. "If this yer baint a proper masterpiece!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Vine?" I asked.

"Weren't no more drunk that night, Tom weren't, nor yeu nor I be, master," and he turned back again and went on wobbling and shaking so that they had to pat him on the back to bring him to.

Presently the bench came in, after deliberation, and said that the case was one which presented points of difficulty, but that after hearing the evidence of Police Constable Hutchings it was impossible to believe that Causey could have been in Squire Hyde's woods at the time and date stated, and that the young man must have been mistaken. The finding of the spud was, no doubt, suspicious, but it might have come there as suggested by the defendant. The Chairman was proceeding to improve the occasion by pointing out to Causey the disgracefulness of drunkenness and how nearly it had brought him into trouble on this occasion, but was checked by the clerk audibly whispering to him—as on a point of law—that in the present instance it was due to being brought home drunk and incapable that Causey was able to prove an alibi and escape conviction; so the Chairman ended, rather more shortly than he had meant, with "Oh! ah! Yes. Case dismissed. Next case."

Causey delayed a moment to get his spud, returned by order, and came out of court cheek

by jowl with the young fellow, the under-keeper, who had given evidence against him. Causey was looking at his spud carefully, to see whether it had suffered injury ; then, noticing who it was beside him, and seeing the young fellow still limped : " I wass main sorry, Bill, vor give 'e sich a clip as I did," he said, " but I wass main hurried-like, vor zartain zure yeu'd a-'ad me by the throat if I 'adn't a-caught 'e a purty good clip about the legs. But I 'adn't meant vor catch 'e such a stout wan—took th' old spud clean out of my 'and it did, zo as I come purty nigh to losing of 'un. I deu owe 'e zumthing, zure enough, vor picking of 'un up, an' thank 'e kindly."

CHAPTER III

BIRD-STUFFING AND OTHER WORK

In the pursuits of boyhood, each season of the year is defined just as clearly as in the calendar of the farmer.

In the spring a boy's time is so occupied with bird-nesting in all its branches, such as finding the nests, climbing the trees, taking the nestlings, blowing the eggs and classifying them, that he is left little leisure for other things. In the high summer he will be occupied in pursuing—whether it be butterflies with a net, or, failing that, a cap, or the immature fledgelings of the year, escaped from the nest which he has spared, and giving him reasonable hopes of a successful issue to expeditions with catapult or other missile engines. The long autumn evenings will be his opportunity for practising his taxidermy, for skinning and stuffing the birds which have lately fallen to his snares or weapons.

Surely a very special providence watches

over the boy who occupies his business with bird-stuffing. In the first place, and before more subtle dangers come to be enumerated, he will of necessity have to work with a very sharp cutting tool. If one spoke of the knife, with which we skinned our birds, by that monosyllabic name we were virtuously indignant; it was a *scalpel*. Then, if a boy escaped the risk of lockjaw, or other serious results of a cut from a knife when it was clean, by how many times was his danger from incisions multiplied when that knife had become encrusted with the blood of a succession of victims, cleaned from it according to a boy's idea of cleansing? And if the operator were miraculously preserved, and survived this danger from the microbes of decomposition, there remained yet more positive peril incurred in the handling of the poisons which must necessarily be used in curing the skins. At the first, it is true, we had to do all our curing with pepper and camphor; poisons were strictly prohibited. Once in a pepper famine we tried salt as an alternative. It was to a starling's skin we applied it; that starling's skin kept moist, as the day it was stripped, all through the summer and to the following winter, when we threw it away; if any fragment of it be yet in existence we are morally certain that it is moist still.

Salt is useless. Pepper, on the other hand, if it be well rubbed in, is good for a long while; but in the end its effect wears off and the moth will corrupt the skin notwithstanding. After a month or two of the practice of taxidermy with the assistance of pepper, the vigilance of the authorities began to tire, and we began with poisons in the shape of corrosive sublimate. We do not recommend it; it is so liquid that its use is attended with inconvenience. Arsenical soap is far better for a boy; it does not spill, and if a thing can be spilled, a boy will spill it.

As good luck would have it, our house was far larger than our needs; so when once we had settled on a scantily furnished room down a little-used passage, and had made it our own by garnishing it with the skins of the birds and the peculiar flavour of taxidermy and preservatives, no one cared to dispute such an excellent title. It was left in our undisturbed possession, scarcely troubled even by a housemaid. Indeed we had so far won over the housemaid whose duty it was to keep this room in the order which is duty's ideal, that far from combating our messes she even aided and abetted them by bringing us raw meat from the kitchen for the young birds, or hard-boiled eggs to chop up for those who needed more delicate diet.

This room was a perpetual joy, for here we could keep all the live creatures and dead trophies banished by Authority from our bedroom, such as the skins of the bigger birds, which boyish fingers had not scraped with sufficient care in the nooks and crannies—rather gruesome objects, in the eye of any but a boy, but which according to his verdict "will be all right in a day or two, when they have dried." These, tyrannical Authority, acting on a specious plea of regard for health, forbade from remaining in a bed-chamber. The same power, on a similar plea, fixed a limit to the number of live birds which were permitted to share the bed-chamber of boyhood. It was necessary that sundry of them should be consigned at nightfall, in company with the uncertain skins, to the less honourable room on the ground floor. Here, too, lived a family of white mice, in constant apprehensions at the spasmodic movements of a young thrush who, piping juvenilely and fed from time to time on oatmeal, inhabited a wicker cage at their side. From a packing-case, on the floor, fronted with lathes nailed so as to leave inch-wide interstices, two young jackdaws said "Jack!" all day long and most of the night; an exclamation only to be appeased by oatmeal thrust so far down the gaping throat that there seemed a danger of the finger being lost irrecover-

ably. Unvaried oatmeal was the food of the nursling jackdaw, which perhaps accounts for the monotony of its note; whereas the thrush's food might from time to time, on Joe's permission (Joe was the coachman's boy), be relieved by small junks of raw meat. There is a comfort, however, about the solid merit of a jackdaw which contrasts favourably with the more pretentious manners of the young thrush. The jackdaw sits and says "Jack," and does not pretend to say anything else, consumes its simple food with gratitude, and is contented with one perch through a whole summer's day. We used to put them out in a great elm tree by the gate of the stable-yard, and there they would sit all through the afternoon in perfect happiness. The young thrushes were always restless, dissatisfied, their tails draggly, jumping about as if they had hysterics, pining, getting caught by cats,—a perpetual thorn in a boy's flesh. There is nothing so analogous to the care of them, in the experience of later life, as colouring a meerschaum pipe. Moreover, the rearing of a songster is a constant tax on the boy's faith. Its infantile notes give little promise, and he has to believe that this creature which constantly declines its food, which has to be tempted and cherished like a *malade imaginaire*, will reward all these cares by glorious song in the ensuing spring. But the jackdaw makes

him no promises, raises no false hopes, begins on the note which will last him all his life through for expressing his gladness in living and the joy of oatmeal.

It was neither in the garden nor in the wood that we found our jackdaws. When one has left the low-lying marshy home of the moor-hen, and the lane with its crumbly wall beloved of the blue-tits, one may proceed to climb up through the alternate shades and sunshines of the wood which was our great bird-nesting preserve. The wood-argus will flit before us across the sunlit spaces, the fritillary glance over the flashing bracken, and finally we may arrive panting and perspiring at the head of the hill-side. Here is a bank, with a wonderful tangle of bramble and honeysuckle over which the bees are humming, and the little blue butterflies coming and going, like gems, from the field of lucerne beyond it. But when one climbs up the gap in the bank one looks forth over a scene which at once takes the eye from all the nearer objects. At two miles' distance twinkle the waves of the Bristol Channel, and the bay over which Mrs. Leigh looked so long for the coming of the good ship *Rose*. The cliffs on which the waves of that sea thundered were the jackdaws' home; they were two miles from our home, and every bush and every turn of the road in that two mile ramble was full of its own

associations. At the angle of the lane which led from our house to the high road a little stream creeps out on to the great thoroughfare, moist even in the driest weather. Once, in a dry spring, peeping cautiously round the corner, we had seen a little covey of house-martins settled in the oozy mud which that tiny rivulet afforded, an oasis in the midst of surrounding dryness. They were busy collecting mud for the nests which they built beneath the eaves. We stole back, for a stone; the martins saw the quick movement of the arm, and rose as the stone came to them, but it glanced from the ground at an angle beyond the calculation of any house-martin, and, on its ricochet, caught one of the birds from beneath. It fell dead, and we rushed out in triumph to secure it, with a joy which no rocketing pheasant, cleanly killed, can bring to a grown sportsman's heart. It was so beautiful with its dark steel-blue back and snowy patch over the tail and white under parts!

Then the way led on past the home of a great friend of ours who owned a single-barrelled gun, and under the shade of great elm trees, where once, for a whole summer, we had been in the habit of seeing a chaffinch with three or four white feathers in his tail, but had never been able to secure him. Thereafter the road led off to the left, and we were soon on high ground, whence

we could see the sea sparkling on our right, and where we scarcely ever failed to put up a yellow-hammer whose habit was to go on along the hedge before us in a succession of short flights, perching continually on the top of some low bush, and sending to us his plaintive song on two notes. We could rely on him to furnish us sport in this fashion for a quarter of a mile of our road; then he would tire of our persecutions and turn back, low-flying, towards the place from which we had started him. Thence the way began to bend downwards. We had left all houses behind us, and went between steep gorse-clad banks with little in them that made sport for us. Occasionally we would see a wren creeping so close in the thick golden-blossomed bushes as to be almost invisible; or a yellow-hammer would perch on their tops, utter his notes once, and then away whither we did not care to follow him through the prickly thicket; or a thrush would rise from grubbing at the foot of a bush and elude us in like manner. Presently we reached the lower ground, where, from a little grove of small roadside elms, a red-backed shrike would fly out and go before us, much as the yellow-hammer had done, but with longer flights and greater shyness, now and again rattling out his anger at our intrusion. The hedges here were a very high and thick tangle of brambles

and wild-growing things. Somewhere among them was the shrike's nest, doubtless, but it never happened to us to find it, though we searched often and long. After this all road and hedges ceased, and we seemed to be coming to the world's end, for there were no houses nor any sign of cultivation—only, on our left, a high rising hill-side of gorse and, on the right, the sea whose cliffs rose ever more steeply as we went on. At two fields' distance or so we would see rabbits sitting out on the short-nibbled grass which grew on the narrowing level stretch between the furzy hillside and the cliffs; but before we came within measurable distance of them they were gone, into the gorse or to their holes in the cliff-side. But by this time we would have seen many jackdaws passing us overhead, going to or from their nests in the cliffs; the clamour of many voices, joining in the simple chorus of "Jack!" would be reaching us, and soon, peering over the edge of the cliff, we would see them coming and going like bees round a hive.

By this time, too, they would be growing aware of our approach, and the clamour would increase by way of protest, a protest which broke forth ten times more clamorous when we rolled a stone down rattling among their homes; then their cries would grow deafening. From

among them a dark thing would sometimes sweep out like an arrow over the sea, as our stone went down the cliff; and at the same moment a shrill piercing cry would come from high above our heads. The dark arrow would slant upwards towards the cry, and as the light of the sun caught it we would see it to be a hen kestrel who had darted out from her cliff-home, and gone aloft to remonstrate, together with her spouse, on this invasion of their domesticity.

The kestrel's nest was rather beyond our hopes. We could see it, a bigger heap of sticks than any that the jackdaws had gathered, perched on a pinnacle of cliff inaccessible equally from above or from below. The sole means of getting to it appeared to be by a rope from the top; but though we often discussed the project of lowering each other over, we never put it into effect by reason of the providential absence of a suitable rope. So at the kestrels we could only look and wonder as at something beyond our best ambitions. In the meantime we found sufficient danger and delight in scrambling about the shaly cliff in search of the more accessible jackdaws' nests. One would be on a niche or platform of the cliff's face, another in the mouth of a hole which a rabbit had deserted for a more convenient dwelling. We found them in all ages and stages; youngsters almost able to fly, newly-

hatched nakednesses with hardly the rudiments of tails, eggs hard set, and eggs newly laid. And all the while that we were taking this census of the younger population, the old ones would be sweeping around us, almost brushing us with their wings and threatening, with exclamations of "Jack!" in the most menacing key, to send us hurtling down into the waters beneath. Indeed it would have taken but a little impetus to do this, for the cliff was of slaty shillet, bound here and there by tussocks and platforms of grass, or by tufts of the sea-pink. The shillet slipped from beneath our feet and gave a very insecure hold, but our nerve was perfect, and the schoolboy's special providence protected us,—in which saying likely enough there is some tautology. Above, the shillet still cropped up from the yellow grass, and was the well-beloved basking place of grayling butterflies, who would rest invisible on the grey lichen-grown boulders. But we recked little of them when our hands, our pockets, our caps were full of young jackdaws crying piteously "Jack!" to which cries the parents responded with deeper notes in the same sense, pursuing us and beating around our heads as the furies pursued and hunted Orestes. But our hard little hearts were deaf to the pathos of the mutual cries, and delightedly we bore off the youngsters, who, sooth to say, soon accepted

their orphanhood and their foster parents with something like Oriental philosophy. They would sit all day on the bough of the great elm tree on which we had put them, outside the doors of the stable yard, contented so long as they might intermittently say "Jack!" and have frequent globules of pasty oatmeal thrust down their gullets.

We have said that we never succeeded in taking the kestrels from these cliffs; but for all that, we had more than one young kestrel as a pet, the gift of a connection by marriage of Joe's brother, who was "summat in the gaming way," —a phrase which might mean a gambler or a gamekeeper, but, in its real sense, as we have reason to believe, signified a poacher. They were wild-eyed captives, these beautiful creatures, with the richest chestnut plumage melting into the most delicate pearl-ash grey. They were not always thus. When they came to us they were little balls of grey fluff, but even then with an eye that was a thing to wonder at and a beak which cleft chasms out of our small fingers. Their demeanour alternated between passionate struggles for freedom and an air of sullen indifference, but they always in either mood showed a healthy appetite for their raw meat. We have heard that the experience of others has been more fortunate; but, so far as our

knowledge of them went, we had no joy of kestrels in captivity.

Of all birds which we tried in captivity ("as pets," we used to call it for euphony,) none were so successful as members of the corvine family, jackdaws, magpies, and that small relation of the crows, the starling. None of them ever talked, though their education was the passion of our young lives. We had been told that starlings would talk only when their tongues had been cleft by a sharp sixpence; but we could never bring ourselves to the point of performing the operation and moreover sixpences were rare. But the starling, though he did not talk with the tongues of men, was for ever chattering, invincibly cheerful though he lived in a cage. The jackdaws did not live in a cage, yet their cheerfulness was not in proportion to their wider liberty of the clipped wing. They, however, we were pleased to think, did talk. True they said but the one word "Jack!" but they said it very often; there could be no mistake about their mastery of it, and we longed for the time when the years, bringing the philosophic mind, should add wisdom and variety to their tones. In youth they were as monotonous as their language and as their manners, for after all the jackdaw is deficient in social talent; his virtues are sterling and respectable, but he does not charm.

Of all pets that were ever kept, the most charming, certainly, was the magpie. It was full of varying moods and humours, truly; but none of them in the least akin to melancholy, whereas the normal disposition of the jackdaws was undoubtedly sombre. At times the magpie was as gay as the starling himself; but he did not exhibit the same unreasonable and wearisome cheerfulness. If he had been shut up in a cage which wore out his tail feathers, he would have bitten the wicker bars to splinters. He was capable of very genuine anger, and inexhaustible in his ingenuity for mischief. His shape and movements, and the bright motley of his plumage, were a joy to the eye; he was a Cavalier to the jackdaw's Puritan. The starling was handsome enough, with the sheen of his green and purple-mottled back, but you had to come close to his cage to appreciate him. The magpie attracted you from afar, only gaining added grace on a closer view which revealed a gloss of gayer colours on what afar off had looked like black; a near view was required, too, to recognise the unspeakable spirit of mischief which abode in his wicked grey eye. For months he was to us a pure joy,—to the gardeners a joy not altogether unmixed, for he was for ever playing harlequin to their pantaloon. Like most practical jokers, he erred in going too far.

One day he amused himself most excellently in uprooting a clump of geraniums just bedded out. He was quite fearless, and it did not occur to his free spirit to obliterate his three-pronged footmarks on the newly-turned earth. Clipped in the wing as he was, he was always a little too fleet for the best of human pursuers. It was a strange shambling, side-long progress, aided by short flights of a few yards at a time, when his wing had not been lately pruned; but it generally served him well enough to take him to some low-branched tree, and once there no man had a chance of catching him. It needed extraordinary ingenuity to capture him for his periodical clipping, for his cunning was greater even than his agility. Altogether he had fared far better than most of our pets, and we looked on him quite as a permanent fixture and a perpetual joy, but two days after his little joke with the geraniums he was missing. We called for him and sought him high and low, in all his favourite haunts, but we never heard again the chuckling response with which he was wont to greet us. To this day his fate remains veiled in the deepest mystery, only—we make no specific charge against any one—but it is significant that his disappearance should have followed so closely on his exploit with the geraniums. After all it was but a little matter. What would they have

said if we had had for a pet Charles Dickens's raven which ate up a grand piano and the greater part of the front staircase?

We never had a raven. We used to see ravens sometimes flying high above those cliffs in which we found the jackdaws' nests. We knew,—as boys do know things, of their inner consciousness or some other unimpeachable testimony (as a matter of fact we think Joe had said so) —that ravens actually did nest further along in those cliffs, where they rose higher and more sheer from the sea. But we never went so far afield as those great precipices, and even if we had reached their feet or summits we could no more have arrived at the ravens' nests than if they had been in another planet. The few ravens we have seen in captivity behaved themselves rather after the staid manner of the jackdaws: they had none of the engaging social qualities of the magpie.

Years afterwards Bob Burscough, my boyhood's best friend, acquired an exotic, which was much the most amusing pet of our acquaintance. He too was of the corvine tribe, but, he came from Australia, was called, in fact, an Australian magpie, though he looked more like a saddle-backed crow. We were staying in the house of his owner when he arrived. A large plate of meat was set for him on the

terrace in front of the house; but he paid a dilettante attention to the victuals, occupying himself chiefly with a scrutiny of the house and his new surroundings, while on his side he was the cynosure of the eyes of all the family gazing at the new pet from the drawing-room windows. Other pets of the house were three very large black cats, great favourites, immensely spoiled, and very dignified and lazy. As we regarded the antipodean somewhat scornfully dallying with his dinner, we saw one of these solemn black monsters advancing at its usual dignified pace towards him. A cry arose from the assembled family, "Oh, Tigris will kill the magpie!" The head of the family desired to await developments. There was a painful suspense of breath, as we watched the shaggy black Persian advancing on the plate and the magpie with a steady, unhurried step. The magpie stood aside from the plate, and, with head well on one side, watched the on-coming robber. There was a world of meaning in the glance of that wicked grey eye, but it was all lost on the dignified composure of the Persian who, without deigning to look at the magpie, proceeded to sniff at the contents of the plate. The bird, motionless as a statue, waited till the black whiskers came inquiringly over the edge of the plate; then he made one sudden hop,

lunged once, with a lightning stroke of his beak, at the beautiful glossy black muzzle, and was back again in his watchful attitude so quickly that one almost felt disposed to doubt if he had ever left it. There was no doubt in the mind of the cat. That lightning stroke of the beak had much the same effect on the Persian as if a bomb had burst somewhere in its middle. It leaped with a yell five paces backward, its legs extended, every separate hair of its long fur standing off it at full length. When it reached the ground it hesitated not for one moment; no fleeting notion of vengeance crossed its mind; with head and tail depressed, in manner as unlike as possible to its dignified approach, it retreated at a good round trot to the shrubbery whence it had come. The magpie slowly relaxed its attentive aspect, and as it addressed itself once more to the plate of viands there were those among the spectators at the window who were ready to aver most solemnly that they saw it wink. The comedy was not yet finished. Before our laughter at the discomfiture of Tigris had died away, a second Persian, Darius, emerged from the shrubbery in the same stately fashion. The bird at once resumed the statuesque pose. In the same manner as before, the cat advanced; the bird repeated its tactics with the same triumphant results; and within two minutes

of its first advance the cat was retreating with undignified haste to recover its composure in the haven of the shrubbery. There was yet another act. The third cat came on the scene, approached the plate, met with a like reception; and he too rejoined his stricken companions in the laurels. It was evident that the cats had played the game in the spirit of those who go into a "Hoax Exhibition" at a charitable bazaar, the first comers revealing nothing to those who follow them of the nature of the entertainment which they will find within.

From this day forth, however, the Australian magpie was headman of all the pets on the premises, and none dared interfere with him any more. His first success encouraged him to further triumphs. He used to lie in wait, screwed up in a corner, on the stone steps by which the nursemaids, with the children, descended the terrace. As they stepped past him he would dash out, with a bark like a dog (though we believe the native Australian dingo is voiceless), and, with a dab of his vicious beak on the unprotected ankles of the maids, so frighten them that they almost dropped the babies. This was his favourite pastime, until he had established so complete a reign of terror that this part at least of his occupation was gone. His crowning impudence, however, was exhibited

when the regimental band of the neighbouring garrison came over to play at a garden-party. The soldiers, arranged in the usual circle, were discoursing popular airs under the conduct of a glorious individual who beat time very impressively in the centre. The display of martial bravery should have been sufficient to inspire reverence in any one, most of all, as might have been thought, in a colonist. The magpie, however, utterly unimpressed, crept between the legs of the *cornet-à-piston*, and, taking a position within the circle opposite to the bandmaster, began mimicking his rather pompous gestures with so ludicrously successful a caricature that the gallant tune came to an untimely end in the uncontrollable laughter of the performers. This was his last great effort. His talent for practical joking brought him into so much disfavour that, chiefly through the petticoated influence of the nursery, he was expelled as remorselessly as any other anarchist; and his genius now finds fewer opportunities in the less congenial atmosphere of the Zoological Gardens.

CHAPTER IV

A MATTER OF FOOTPRINTS

Tom Causey, a spaniel, two terriers of uncertain breed, and the writer of the present narrative, were watching Joe Gamerton, the cobbler of Bidecombe, in Devon, as he hammered the iron "clou" on the heel of a boot in a little shop of Cold Harbour Lane, which leads down to the quay. They watched, not because they had any boots which wanted mending, nor any business at all to occupy them in the shop, but out of sheer idleness and the need of society. Tom Causey was by nature a social man, and of the number of those whose society is always entertaining. By profession, as already noticed, he was rat and rabbit-catcher to all and sundry who required such services, or assistance in them, on their farms—a fact which sufficiently explains the spaniel and two terriers. In person he was broad and burly, with a wide red face, and narrow eyes sunken in his head between rolls of fat flesh. Fringes of grizzling hair made a frame

for this round red face. His nose, like the face, was round and red, as of a man who was generous in quenching a frequent thirst. His coat was of velveteen, stained by much contact with Mother Earth as he worked his ferrets, by much of the honourable blood of the slain, and by exposure to all sorts of weather. It had voluminous flaps, with pockets constructed of a liberal width and depth, so that no matter how many rabbits he had stowed away in them there was always room for just one more. His breeches stuff was a corduroy, of as many various shades as his coat itself, a pair of weather-beaten leathern leggings meeting it. His hat, somewhat green and greasy, was a wideawake which had once been black, and in its prime might have been worn with decorum by a parson. Beneath it his dark, grizzled locks crept out in little ringlets. There were ringlets, also, of some base yellow metal in his ears, bored at a time when he fancied that such adornment would add to his attractions, which might conceivably have been considerable, for the ladies. His waistcoat buttons were of bright brass, and a watch-chain of the same gay metal lay across it. A horn dog-whistle hung by a piece of stout cord from the buttonhole of the velveteen coat. Across his shoulders was slung a bag containing ferrets, among others that most

notorious and very large "string ferret," Belzy, well known to fame in all the countryside; and in his hand he carried a strong ashen staff terminated at the foot by an iron spud. It was designed for the homely use of digging out ferrets which had "laid up" with a nest of young rats or rabbits, or with an adult rabbit which had the queer taste to prefer being eaten alive to bolting. It had once been lost and recovered, in dramatic circumstances already mentioned, in Squire Hyde's pheasant coverts. Thus armed and equipped, the rabbit-catcher made a formidable and something of a Falstaffian figure as he stood blocking the evening sunlight from the door of the cobbler's shop.

As for the cobbler, it would be a superfluous compliment to describe him in any such detail—a little spare man, inconspicuously garbed, with the complexion of one who works in a close atmosphere, and whose chief beverage is from the bowl which does not inebriate, and only cheers to a moderate degree. He was as marked a contrast with the other as you could expect to find.

"And who be they vor?" asked Causey, referring to the boots, after the merits, in their various kind, of the dogs had been spoken of enough.

"They'm Gearge Rimehouse's. It be

scan'alous, sure enough, 'ow 'ee do wear the zoles off mun, trap'sin' along th' old river bank."

Causey had been lounging in the doorway with the slackened muscles and pose of a man who has nothing to do but let the hours flow by him as they will. Even his great burly frame was tired by a long day after the rabbits, and he had still a tramp of a mile and a half before he would reach his ramshackle old cottage standing above the river in the few fields of which he managed to retain the tenancy in spite of a chronic backwardness with the rent. Nevertheless, as he heard the name of Rimehouse there came over his whole figure a certain change of attitude, which Gamerton, the cobbler, must have noticed if he had lifted his eyes from the boot soles. It was the change from the loose listlessness of indifference to the keen tautness of aroused attention. His slack jowl and lips tightened up, and the little eyes twinkled in their slits between the rolls of flesh. For all that, there was in his tone a studied indifference as he answered, after a moment's pause:

"Gearge Rimehouse's! Be they, zure enough?"

George Rimehouse, the river-watcher, had the office of patrolling, in the joint interests and at the joint expense of several different riparian owners, some five or six miles of the river above

Bidecombe town, in order to see that no nefarious deeds were done in the way of poaching the salmon, to attend to the fences, stiles, bridges, and footpaths, and generally to take cognisance of anything that went at all amiss, whether due to the hand of man or nature, along the river bank. He was a conscientious man, from South Devon. They said in the north that he did not understand their ways, which were, no doubt, difficult of comprehension for one not to the manner born. But it is possible that those riparian owners showed wisdom in their generation when they imported from another district this guardian of their fishy property.

Following Tom Causey's comment on the boots being for Rimehouse, and the slight stiffening to attention with which he received the name, there came a pause for a moment in the conversation, which was broken only by the cobbler's hammering on the iron "clou." Then the rabbit-catcher said, with no seeming relevancy:

"It be easy work, zure enough, 'ammerin' in them nails, same as you'm doin' now."

"It bain't main difficult for them as be used to it," the cobbler assented, rather grudgingly, as if jealous for the art of his trade.

"'Tis work as I deu for myself most times," Causey declared, "'ammerin' in them nails."

"Like enough," was the cobbler's dry reply.

There was another trifling pause, and then Causey said:

"Deu 'ee ever 'ave a mind, Joe, vor draw your teeth into a rabburt?" At the mention of the word the three dogs evinced a stiffening of attention rather similar to that of their master at the name of Rimehouse.

The suggestion had an attraction for the cobbler also. He paused in his work to give an expectant glance at his visitor. "I be main fond of a rabburt. 'Ees fai', I be," he answered.

"Well, then," said Causey, probing one hand into the profundities of one of his coat pockets, "'tis a rabburt as I've a mind vor give 'ee, Joe. See, there's a beauty, 'ee be," dragging one forth as he spoke, and stroking the ruffled fur of the dead creature into a semblance of sleekness; "a vine rabburt vor dinner, zure enough. But 'tis on'y supposin' as you'm minded vor deu me a sarvice, Joe," he continued significantly.

"I be main obliged to 'ee, Tom, and zo I be," said the cobbler gratefully. "An' what be the sarvice as I can deu vor 'ee?"

"'Tis no more'n jist rin up to the 'Ring o' Bells' and vetch down a little dogue as I've aleft there, 'case the tax-collector come roun' to my 'ouse vor ask the licence vor un. 'Ee'th

made 'ees call on'y yesterday, zo I can 'ave un 'ome agin."

"An' zo I will, an' welcome," the cobbler said heartily, leaving his work at the word, and proceeding to put on his coat to go on the errand.

"An', time you'm gone, I may all zo well be fixin' in the nails to them there boots vor 'ee, zo as you'll vind mun done, time you come back."

"Thank 'ee kindly, Tom. You may all zo well deu that as sit still and deu nothin'."

No sooner had the cobbler gone than Tom Causey set himself to work with a surprising industry on the task he had undertaken. Laying the bag of ferrets beside him on the floor, he hammered the nails in diligently, taking a special pride, as it appeared, in arranging them in a peculiar fashion, of his own devising, about the toe. When he had finished his task on the one boot he applied himself with similar diligence to the other. He worked with a feverish energy, as though he deemed it a point of honour to have the nailing of the boots completed before his emissary could have gone to the "Ring of Bells,' the public at the head of the town, and be back with the unlicensed dog. When all the nails were driven home he had not yet finished all he had to do; for, still with the same singular haste, he tore two large pieces from a sheet of the Bidecombe *Weekly News*, which he had chanced

to find in the shop, and pressed one piece carefully over the sole of the left foot and the other as carefully over the right in such a way that the imprint of the nails was recorded accurately on each. When he had done that he heaved a heavy sigh, as of a man whose task is fairly accomplished, folded the pieces of paper neatly, and bestowed them in another of the many pockets of his coat from that which was the common receptacle of the rabbits. Then he went to the doorway and resumed his former air of *otium cum dignitate*, awaiting the return of the master of the shop.

"What are you doing all that for?" I asked, when he was again at leisure.

"Oh you'm there, be 'ee?" he said, as if he had forgotten all about me. "Do 'ee know as I once 'eerd tell of a man as made a great fortune?"

"How was that?" I asked.

"Why, 'twas by mindin' of 'ees own business. There—do 'ee see?"

I saw sufficiently to know that I was rebuked, and sat silent, caressing the least hostile of the dogs, to await the next happening of interest.

Within a very few minutes the cobbler reappeared, bearing in his arms a singularly ill-favoured specimen of a broken-haired fox-terrier, which the other dogs received with much blandishment as a long-lost brother.

"A be'uty, bain't 'ee, zure enough?" said Tom Causey, regarding him with pride. "An' as for them there boots, I've a-fitted mun up with the nails proper, an' zo I 'ave."

"An' zo you 'ave, zure enough," the cobbler assented. "'Tis a vunny little pattern as you've a-made of mun about the toe, bain't it?" he added a little doubtfully.

"There be wan thing," said Causey impressively, taking no notice of this criticism. "You bain't on no account vor tell Gearge Rimehouse as 'twas me as 'ad the nailin' of mun. 'Twouldn't be proper like, seein' as they was left vor you."

"You'm right, Tom," Gamerton averred, recognizing the scrupulous delicacy of feeling which prompted the caution. "You may go bail as I'll never tell 'un. Well, good-night to 'ee, Tom," as Causey made a move to be going. "Good-night to 'ee, and thank 'ee kindly for the rabburt."

"And mind as you don't say nothin' to un neither, if so be as yeu should 'appen vor zee un," said Causey to me, as we took our leave together.

I gave him my word to be silent as the grave, and I kept it, although for the ensuing part of the story I was mainly indebted to the illuminating conversation of Rimehouse himself.

A few weeks later, that foreigner, as we

deemed him, from the South, might have been seen sitting by the river bank, the worst puzzled man in North Devon. The place where he sat was a very beautiful one, specially designed, as one might fancy, to be the scene of a poet's reveries, with the well-wooded cliff coming almost sheer down behind to meet the white sand washed up by the water into a little semi-circular bay, and the river itself purling away in front with sparkling flashes of foam as it leapt over the rocks and deep amber translucencies where it flowed unbroken. The reverie, however, which absorbed the river-watcher was not at all a poetical one; its subject was of the first practical importance. He was, in fact, in the engrossed study of a footprint, which engaged all his attention. It is a picture which may recall an historical scene in a story still more widely known to fame than this, although the present is sufficiently familiar in North Devon. Robinson Crusoe regarding the naked footprint on the sand of what he had hitherto believed to be his solitary island could not have been more strikingly arrested by its appearance than was Rimehouse by the print of which he was now endeavouring to decipher the significance. Unlike the impression which had so thrilling an effect on Defoe's illustrious derelict, this was the impression of a booted, not of a naked foot. More

than that, it was the impression of a heavily-nailed and iron-shod boot, such a boot as any rustic of the countryside might be expected to wear. But what gave it its arresting significance in the eyes of Rimehouse was that its nails were distributed exactly in the peculiar arrangement of the nails in the pair of boots which he had recently had repaired by Joe Gamerton the cobbler in the town of Bidecombe—the very pair, as it so happened, which he was wearing at the moment when the startling impression first presented itself to him.

At first sight it might not seem obvious why Rimehouse should be so badly perturbed by the appearance of one of his own footprints, for it was his daily habit and business to perambulate the banks of the river from one end to the other of the beat over which his watching extended, so that the print of his footsteps imbedded on any part of it which was impressionable had in general no reason to cause him any surprise. But the fact which gave to this particular impression its strange and inexplicable interest was that he felt morally certain that he had not set foot on this particular white-sanded bay on the day before, and that two nights previously a lashing rain had fallen which would certainly, unless all his former experience misled him, have washed out from the soft sand the

impression of even so large a foot as his. The day before he had contented himself with walking along the upper path, above the wooded cliff which formed the real bank of the river at this point, and had never come down to the actual level of the shore. Yet here, before his eyes, was proof which seemed positive that he must, waking or sleeping, have descended to the very edge of the water; and since he had no memory of doing so in his waking state he began to discuss in his mind the possibility that he had come thither in his sleep. He had heard stories of somnambulistic performances of the kind, of which the sleeper was quite unconscious when he awoke. On the whole, however, he was inclined to reject this ingenious hypothesis, for the sound reason that he had never hitherto convicted himself of any such unnatural proceeding, and after musing for the best part of half an hour over the puzzle presented to him by the footprint, continued on his way down the river, leaving the mystery still unsolved and constantly recurring to his mind.

He had further troubles to annoy him. Until the heavy rain of the night before last there had been a drought quite unusual in that humid climate for some weeks past and the river had fallen abnormally low. It was a time when every fish in every pool could be seen quite

clearly, so that the watcher knew exactly how many there should be in each, for salmon do not change their quarters when the water is in this low state. Yet constantly, as he came to examine the pools, he would find a fish or two missing. None of the pools was ever recruited by a new inmate, so he could be pretty confident that the fish had not departed from their usual habits and run into a higher pool from a lower or drifted down; indeed the lowness of the water made it hardly possible for them to do so. There was no doubt that some one or something was taking out the fish. He suspected otters, but could find no signs of them either in the form of tracks or of any half-eaten remains of fish. He had looked with care for the traces of any fresh human footprints on any of the soft places on the margins of the pools, but never was able to find any but his own, which were the more unmistakable on account of the singular manner in which the nails had been set in his boots by the cobbler of Bidecombe. The river-watcher had an uneasy sense that things were going against him; he had even the feeling that there was something "whisht," as he expressed it to himself (which means in the Devonian tongue something of an uncanny character), happening, that had come to its culmination in this unaccountable footprint of his which he had

found in a place where it seemed impossible that he could have impressed it in any natural way. The problems of his life appeared too hard for him.

. . . . . .

There is that about this story of Rimehouse which seems to connect him psychologically with the great astronomers. One of the several riparian owners in whose interest he served had been inspired to present him with a watcher's telescope, a plain but efficient instrument such as is used by the gillies or stalkers on the Scottish hills. It was something of a new toy to Rimehouse, and as he sat on a high bluff overlooking the river, about a mile or so further than the spot at which he had perceived the disquieting footmark, he pulled out his glass and tried to divert his attention from the puzzle which was perplexing him by following, through the telescope, all that was visible of the river. And as he so looked through it, there "swam into his ken," as the stories of astronomical discoveries have it, not, indeed, a new planet or a comet, but the figure of a man sitting down and curiously bent over and contorted. Had it not been—so Rimehouse always declared in his frequent repetitions of the story—that his mind at the moment was greatly occupied with boots, he would probably have been quite at a loss to

conceive what the man could be doing, but, obsessed as he was with the puzzle of the footprint, the true significance of the attitude struck him at once—the man was changing his boots! No sooner had his sagacious brain received this vivid impression than it was immediately followed by another—namely, that the bank of the river was a very singular place to choose for this thoroughly domestic action. Not that the change was in process of operation in any exposed spot, although by a curious coincidence Rimehouse's telescopic sight had fastened on it from so great a distance. On the contrary, so far as he could judge, it was extremely sheltered, in a kind of arbour formed by the surrounding boscage; and perhaps from no other place than that occupied by Rimehouse would it have been open to observation from without, and from any man's natural vision unaided by a telescope it would have been quite invisible even there. Nevertheless, in spite of this comparative privacy the spot appeared to Rimehouse a curiously chosen one for an act which is much more commonly performed at home.

He held his glass glued with firm precision on the man, thus singularly occupied. In a few moments the change, as it appeared, was completed, and the man, still under his observation, stood up. The figure even at that distance

was familiar, not to be mistaken—Tom Causey! The next moment he had taken a step which interposed a screen of foliage between himself and the telescope, but Rimehouse had seen enough; he shut up the glass with a click, and went striding at his best pace down the hill.

He was a long, lank man, black-bearded, with loose limbs, which took him over the ground at a great speed. His figure did not carry much promise of strength, but those who had tried a fall with him at the Devonshire wrestling had reason to remember the unexpected wiriness of his muscle and his grip of steel. In a boxing booth at Barnstaple fair he had knocked out the professional champion, not by any great mastery of the science of the noble art, but by the immense length of his arm, which reached the opponent's face while the other's fist came nearly six inches short of his own. He did not know as yet what he might find when he arrived at the spot where he perceived Tom Causey making this remarkable change of his footgear, but the prospect of a rough-and-tumble fight crossed his mind as a very possible part of the entertainment and, big though Causey was, he did not quail from it. He did not make the mistake of wasting any time in trying to discover the direction in which Causey might have gone. He assumed, however, that the river would be the objective,

and with a careful note in his mind of the exact bearings of the spot where the change of boots had been accomplished, made a slight detour inland, and came straight down upon it from the side remote from the river.

He had located the place with accuracy by its proximity to a tall ash, which is not a very common tree in North Devon, and presently stood on the very spot where he had watched the unsuspecting Causey through his far-seeing glass. All the impressions of the ground bore witness to the justice of his conclusion that the man he had seen had been changing his boots. The grass was laid where the man had sat, there were the marks of the boot-heels in a sandy patch, the boots which had lately been taken off were lying scarcely hidden by a tussock. Thrusting his hand into one of them, Rimehouse found it yet warm from the heat of the foot which it had lately held. With his hand still stuck thus into the great boot, his figure froze and stiffened with intent astonishment for the second time that day at sight of a footprint in the sand—again his own footprint, with that singular pattern of the nails around the toe, and again in a place where he knew that he had not set foot.

He stood and stared, and again that chill sense that "whisht" things were about came over him; but it endured only for a short while.

By degrees the intentness of his look relaxed, as a dawning intelligence of the meaning of it all came to him. He even smiled to himself, between anger and amusement, as a full conviction reached him of how he had been fooled.

"Tom Causey," he said, speaking softly to himself, "you be a master vagabone, you be."

He meditated a moment as if uncertain how best to deal with this "master vagabone," in whose hands he felt himself to have been a fool and plaything. The sight of the great boot still in his hand seemed to bring inspiration. He picked up its fellow, and crept back with the pair into the bushes. Then he searched about until he found a tree of blackthorn, off which he broke a small twig or two. He felt the thorns, like a connoisseur; they were sharp and strong. He selected two of the twigs which bore, close together, on an inch or two of their length, three or four of the finest specimens of thorn, and then he pushed them well home into the toes of the boots. He thrust them so far that not until the foot, forcing its way into the boot, had passed that crucial point at which the heel sticks hardest, and had gone with a thud well home into the boot, would it be conscious of the presence of the thorns at all. No doubt it was not quite a nice thing to do; but then Rimehouse was a South Devon man.

And having set his trap in this manner, he replaced the boots where he had found them; then he ensconced himself once more within the bushes and waited for Tom Causey to return.

He had the best part of an hour to wait, but never thought of quitting his post. He felt as if he could sit there till the crack of doom, in anticipation of the rich joy which would be his when the big man changed his boots. Presently, with a quiet tread marvellous for a person of his bulk, and acquired only through the life-long habit of walking as if a rabbit, sitting to be pounced on, were immediately in front, Causey came from the river, parting the bushes with a right hand held high before his face; and in that right hand was something which might have suggested to Rimehouse, had his mind been in the imaginative mood, a gleaming sword. But that mood had passed from him; he had exhausted it in his dealings with the boots; and now, in the phase of hard practical observation, he saw the thing in Causey's right fist clearly for what it was—a salmon held by the tail. And at that his slow grin of expectation deepened—the enemy was completely delivered into his hands.

The broad face of Causey was very pleasant, too, with satisfaction as he sat down heavily, once more to change his footgear. His back, as he sat, was towards Rimehouse, who was

watching him intently; but as he took off the first boot he threw it beside him carelessly in such a way that its sole was turned to Rimehouse, and he saw, as he knew that he should see, the nails arranged just in the pattern of those at his own boot's toe. Then Causey took up the other boot —that with the nails on the sole of the toe set in ordinary fashion, but with a certain quite novel arrangement of spikes in the inside of which even he, the owner of the boot, was still unconscious.

As Causey leant forward to put his foot into the boot, Rimehouse raised his face above the bushes to watch events. There was a moment's pause—that moment of effort while the heel was pushing past the tightest part where the upper of the boot goes round the ankle. Rimehouse just saw the big figure of the other make its first movement of relief and relaxing of the muscles as his heel went past this tight place; and then there came a sudden, wild-beast roar.

This was the signal for which Rimehouse had been waiting. He did not hurry himself, but went forward quietly with his long, lounging steps.

"Boots don't vit 'ee, I'm afeared, Tom," he said, with pleasant sympathy.

He stooped with seeming carelessness to pick up the salmon and the boot which Causey had just taken off; yet, even so, it seemed that he

was on the watch against developments, for when Causey, with a big curse, hurled at his head the only boot still unappropriated he was quite prepared to dodge it, if dodging had been necessary. But it is difficult, with the best will in the world, to throw straight when one is sitting, and Rimehouse's head was in no danger.

"Thank 'ee kindly, Tom, vor that there. 'Twas jest that t'other boot as I was a-wantin' for make up the evidence like, when us comes bevoor the coort. Shall 'ope for meet 'ee again there soon, Tom."

During these observations, of which Causey evidently appreciated the humour far less keenly than their author, the big man was writhing in an agony of mingled pain, fury, effort to get off the boot, and desire to get at Rimehouse. But it is hard for a man to pull off a boot quickly when several spikes at its toe are running into his foot with a keenness which causes him intense anguish in the attempt to get the foot into the position in which it can slip out of a boot easily; and when he is divided between this desire and an eagerness to be up and pursue an enemy he presents that spectacle of a good man struggling with adversity which has always been deemed supremely edifying to the gods. It was in this striking aspect that Causey now exhibited himself to the gratified appreciation of

Rimehouse; but as for any remarks which he uttered, they are not to be repeated, for the reason that for the most part they were incoherent, in his rage and agony, and for the rest, as retailed by Rimehouse, not such as the young person should read. Rimehouse did his best for him, however, saying soothingly:

"I do beg 'ee, Tom, don't 'ee go work yourself into a vit; now don't 'ee. Ef you was vor burst yourself and die, as it do zeem to me main likely is what you mean vor do, bevoor you've a-got off that there boot which zeems vor vex 'ee, why maybe as volks might think as 'ow I was vor blame in it."

"An' serve 'ee well right ef you was vor 'ang vor sech dirty trick as this yer, you scounnerel," roared Causey, finding articulate voice for once.

"I reckon there's wan o' the present company of two as 'll 'ang avoor I shall, Tom," said the river-watcher amiably. "Gude-bye to 'ee in the meantime. Us'll meet again soon in the coort, zure enough."

And with this pleasant anticipation Rimehouse pushed his way through the bushes, carrying the salmon and the boots, leaving Causey at leisure, and at such peace as he could command, to extricate his foot from its horrid prison.

The denouement is obvious enough and

simple. The salmon, by that time in a condition which made its presence known throughout the court, was produced with the boots before the magistrates at their next meeting, Causey himself being present in obedience to a summons. The fish showed signs of impalement by two of the big hooks of one of those three-hooked arrangements with which poachers commonly snatch salmon. Causey had cross-summoned Rimehouse for wounding with intent to do grievous bodily harm, and had a huge piece of evidence in support of his plea in shape of his own foot swathed in enough bandages for a whole mummy, which he was disappointed in not being allowed to remove in order to show his toe to the court. The magistrates unsympathetically nonsuited him, on the ground advanced by Rimehouse that he had acted in virtual self-defence in putting the thorns in the boots, in order that Causey should be unable to attack and pursue him.

When sentence was pronounced—fine, with alternative of imprisonment—Causey produced the money then and there out of a black leathern purse, in court, with the pleasant sentiment that he "'oped as it might do the genelmen of the bench much gude."

But though Rimehouse won the case, it is to be doubted whether the whole story did not

make more for the credit of Causey, because of his ingenuity in nailing his boots on the pattern of Rimehouse's, in the eyes of all reasonable men of North Devon. They did not altogether like Rimehouse's action throughout the case. It was not so much the matter of putting the thorns into the boots that was objected to; that seemed all fair enough, because blackthorn was a common tree and grew everywhere, and, besides, it was noticed that Tom Causey walked a great deal better on his bandaged foot as soon as the case had been settled, although it had gone against him, than when he thought that he might have anything to gain by hobbling; but what people did not quite like was the telescope. That seemed to be taking an unfair and ultra-scientific advantage—hardly playing the game. But, then, Rimehouse, after all, was a South Devon man.

CHAPTER V

A DORMOUSE, A GULL, AND SOME ANGLING

I SEE that in this narrative there is danger of misapprehension arising from unguarded use of that plural "we," which is the natural prerogative of editors and other regal beings. But that is not at all its sense in this connection. In the retrospect of my boyhood I find that there were always two of us so naturally at one in our pursuits and interests as to jump together, almost of necessity, to my mind's eye. In the first place, to speak with egotism, there was myself, and in the second Bob Burscough, just of my own age, son of our neighbour, Colonel Burscough, living on the hill; and as the Colonel's was but a small house, having none of the spacious amenities in the way of coverts for small birds and even for rabbits, which we were fortunate in possessing, it happened that Bob was only too glad to avail himself of this large hospitality which I was able to offer him, and for my part I should have been only half myself without his company. Our pets were

our common property, he had the right of coming and going in our house as if it were his own. Authority, we admitted, was liberal-minded in this—we always tried to be fair in ascribing to authority such little credit as was its due—and as for the authority on Bob's own side, his uncle, the Colonel, seeing that he was a widower and had volunteered to take charge of Bob for his parents, who were in India, he was no doubt only too thankful that the boy should be happily busy and out of his way. At that time I understood but little of the nature of the profession in India of Bob's father, which was spoken of in a picturesque and attractive metaphor by the Colonel as "shaking the pagoda tree," but subsequently that same shaking, proving prolific, happened to make a considerable and agreeable difference to a portion of my own life. That, however, is all part of the later story.

The wood in which we had leave to roam was not preserved, in the game-keeper's sense, or else we should not have been allowed such free right of its leafy ways. Nevertheless it happened to us, on glorious occasions, to put up a far-wandering cock-pheasant, whose whirring wings made our little hearts beat at such a rate that we could scarcely see the wonder until it had risen high above the tree-tops. Rabbits, even, were so scarce that with all our searching

and digging we never came upon a nest, though we used often to see them sitting in the field outside the boundary-fence, or catch a glimpse of them as they scudded from us through the bushes. Our little weapons, catapults and the like, were not sufficient for their destruction, and we never became the possessors of any steel-trap larger than those in which we caught the poor small birds. Squirrels we used to see, and persecute from tree to tree until they escaped us behind a bough or in some dense leafy obscurity. Fur, in fact, is always too big game for boys, until they reach the gunning age. The true quarry of boys is feather, and a sufficing delight to them. Yet it did happen once that fur fell in our way,—once and once only, and not in too satisfactory a manner. For, as we wandered in the winter-time over the crackling floor of red, dry leaves, we espied a tiny bundle which looked for a moment as if it had been got together for a purpose,—looked like an edition, on a very small scale, of those balls of leaves and grass which the hedgehogs manage to roll round themselves and in which we often found them, both in our orchard-hedge and in the wood. We took up this tiny bundle, and pulled off a leaf or two; then, thinking it after all a mere chance collection, threw it to the ground again. On which Joe, the coachman's boy, who was of our

party, more sapiently curious, picked it up and, unrolling yet more coats of leaves, revealed at last, within this snug nest, a coiled up tiny red thing,—a dormouse. This was its winter home, in which it had promised itself to lie asleep all the cold weather through. But our quick eyes had detected it among surroundings so like itself; and Joe, with greater patience, had followed up our discovery to its culmination in this little, warm, breathing, furry, sleeping thing.

Of course we claimed it, crying quickly that we had found it, and demanding that we should be allowed the immediate joy of having it in our hand. To which Joe sturdily replied that we had indeed found it, but had thrown it away as of no worth, and that he had again found it; that it had become by our deed of rejection no man's property; but that now it was in deed and fact a man's property, namely his, and that he meant to keep it. No doubt the most obvious and ready way of settling the difficulty, as between boys, was the ordeal by battle; but this, having regard to the respective qualities of the contesting parties, was inadmissible, for Joe was our elder by two years and our superior in physical strength, so that such a mode of decision would have been grossly unfair; whereas, on the other hand, we were Joe's superior in social station, so that he would have been

unwilling to lay a violent hand upon us. The idea that we should set upon him together—two to one—would have been quite impossible to our strict code of honour. In this dilemma we eventually resolved to submit the decision to the arbitrament of Fortune by the classical method of spinning a coin, namely a halfpenny, which, turning up a head, when we had called "tails," gave to Joe the dormouse and to us a feeling of unjust treatment which nearly found vent in tears. The only other vent which it found was in searching day after day for a whole week, and, at intervals, for many weeks, among that rich crackling carpet of dry leaves, but never again did the same luck befall us. We never found another dormouse, and probably we never shall.

We could find rabbits nearer home beside the stream which coursed through the meadow in which we flushed our first jacksnipe. Above the stream a great bank, topped with a hedge, sloped steeply up. In the bank were great holes, originally wrought by rabbits, but enlarged by the diggings of dogs and boys who strayed off the adjacent foot-path. The few harassed rabbits which made this bank their home were wary from constant persecution; too wary, and we could attempt nothing against them. Yet we loved the whole length of this valley along which the sluggish stream ran, from the pond

formed for the cows to drink at (where once, when some draining operations were going on, we caught several eels of nine inches or a foot long) to the great tidal estuary of the big river where a few sand-pipers or dotterel were generally running at the edge of the water and a gull or two hovering and settling along the water-line. For part of its course this stream went almost buried in a profuse tangle of bramble and blackthorn and May, such as often goes in the western counties to make what they simply call a hedge.

In this tangle we did not fail to find at least one blackbird's nest, and more than one thrush's. A few elms grew up through it, and against the stems of one of them, posted on a small out-shooting branch, was the annual nest of a green-finch. Nearer the cattle's drinking-place was a slope enclosed as too steep for pasturage, and within the enclosure were rhododendrons under the shadow of big beeches. The stems of the trees were covered with ivy, and in the ivy we commonly found one or two nests of wrens.

The nests of wrens, and of all dome-building birds, are a sad trial to boyhood, for it is scarcely possible to see into them, and the intrusion of a finger is apt to make the birds desert. But none of these were so cruel an exasperation as the mud-cups which the house martins built just

below the eaves and at such a height from the third-story window that even by imperilling our lives on the window-sill we failed to reach them. Nothing therefore was more satisfactory to us than the high-handed action of a pair of sparrows in taking forcible possession of one of these nests and using it for their own domestic purposes. We did not know at what stage in the domestic operations of the builders the sparrows entered on their tenancy; we knew only that one day a sparrow's broad head and strong beak appeared peeping out over the mud wall and held its own against the complaints and challenges not only of the builders, but of a mass meeting of the unemployed of their kind which they seemed to have called together for the purpose of backing their protests. We then began to look with interest for that which, according to the teaching of our Natural Histories, ought to have followed, namely, the walling-in of the sparrow by the martins and all their friends, bringing beaks-ful of mud and plastering it over the hole. But no such thing ever happened; the martins never did more than make a few noisy ineffectual demonstrations. And, after all, that story in the books did not sound a very likely one. One always wondered what the sparrow, with his broad bull head and great strong beak, could have

been about all the time that the walling-in was going on. We knew, of course, well enough (for we had seen it) that a nut-hatch will plaster up with mud a hole in a tree which leads to a likely nesting-place, if it deems the hole bigger than convenient; but in that case there would be no inmate with a good beak to be reckoned with while the plastering went on.

We had to believe, too, that bees will wall-up, with bees'-wax, a snail that is injudicious enough to crawl into the hive; for when a certain hive of bees died off for lack of a queen (a fearful example to Anarchy), we were shown a lump, looking like a great wart, on the hive's floor, and on dissecting the wart with a pen-knife, found it to contain a snail, shell and all, embalmed in bees'-wax. It was an extraordinarily fresh snail, too, considering how long it had been dead; and that, no doubt, was due to the hermetical sealing-out of the air.

There was no difficulty in crediting this, even had we not seen it; for a snail has very poor means of offence compared with a hive full of bees. It was very different when it came to a question of a house-sparrow against martins. The beaks of the fly-feeding birds are not weapons of war. This sparrow, at all events, that fell under our observation, was undisturbed in his forcible occupation of the martin's castle,

and brought up a flourishing family therein; and on his children there fell a Nemesis, with perfect poetical justice. For we had a gull, a tame gull with clipped wings, who would feed on fish if we would give him any, failing fish on raw meat, failing raw meat on worms and insects, and, failing these, on anything, including sparrows. It was the most fascinating entertainment to give him an eel; for he would toss the eel about several ways, until it came to the position most suitable for swallowing, when he would swallow it; but the eel, not yet defeated, would often wriggle up his gullet again, and this process would be repeated many a time. So, if swallowing be a delight, the pleasure which our gull derived from the process, must have been manifold. Eventually the eel would weary of the vain ascent of the gull's gullet, and consent to remain in contact with the juices of digestion. Nature is a queer mother to her children.

One never knows how much the state of domesticity affects creatures that ought to be wild. In the natural state perhaps one swallowing would have been enough for the gull,—and for the eel. He was a herring-gull, and it was not until his fifth year that he arrived at the full dignity of his white and pearly plumage. Before that he was always dressed in some of the dingy, dusky feathers of infancy. Yet in their wild

state these gulls are said to arrive at the adult plumage before the fifth year.

His gastronomic fondness for sparrows has been mentioned. He was also fond of mice, and had an extraordinary penchant for swallowing them alive. The interior arrangements of that bird were what an American would call a cast-iron wonder; for consider, a mouse and a gull! If a mouse had a fair chance of a bite and a scratch at the outside even of a gull he would make things quite uncomfortable for the bird, and yet the gull would swallow him with perfect comfort, and digest him with unruffled pleasure. The bird would pause a moment with a laugh in his eye, to enjoy the agonized waving of the tail, when the mouse's body was already well in the entrance of the "red lane." Then down the tail went after the body, and the mouse, unlike the eel, never came back again. Generally he would catch his mice for himself, but it appealed to his subtle sense of humour to steal them from the cat. He was good friends with the cat,—a friendship based on the firm ground of mutual respect—but this did not prevent his stealing her mice. When she was engaged with one after the feline manner, letting it out of her grasp to run a foot or two, and then recovering it with a prehensile paw, the gull would come ambling up to her with every affectation of a

scientific and platonic interest. He would watch the proceedings with perfect gravity for a minute or two, and it was only when the mouse, eluding the cat, was well within his reach that he would give an appreciative chuckle, at the same time stretching forward a great yellow bill cavernously open, and receive down the yellow gulf the mouse who seemed quite pleased to have discovered such a refuge. Then the cat's face became a study. She watched the waving of the tail, and, when the last sign of it had disappeared, came up nearer and examined the gull more closely. She seemed to wish to find out by outward inspection whether the mouse really was inside that queer arrangement of beak and feathers. But the gull did nothing but wink, and left the cat in so great a state of perplexity that she was no more careful than before when next the gull sidled up to her as she was playing the game of cat and mouse.

The mice were unoffending, and there was a protest that was pathetic in the wave of the tail with which they went down; but the sparrows came of a bad race and deserved their fate. They suffered assimilation in the cast-iron interior of the gull merely as a punishment for their temerity in coming to steal his dinner. We gave him a daily dinner of scraps, besides occasional delicate morsels such as worms and

fishes. These were an attraction to the sparrows, especially to those sparrows who, looking down from the vantage post of the martin's nest, could see him day by day making a dish of scraps disappear. It was tempting, no doubt, and the young sparrows fell. They had inherited burglarious tendencies, as has been shown, and they were bold young robbers. They came out into the world chirping and defiant. Had the original makers of the mud-nest succeeded in the design of bringing up therein their own family, they would have needed to have given that young family something more than encouragement before they brought them out into the world. The youngsters would have dreaded the first flight abroad, so that the parents would have been compelled to take away beakful after beakful of the nest-wall, even as they had built it up, until there was no more left but a little patch of mud on which the nestlings would no longer care to perch, but would launch themselves, half hustled against their will, into the air, and find to their surprise that they could float and skim and soar through the sky just as they saw their father and mother do. That is the nature of house-martins, so fearful are they of making their first trial.

But such was by no means the nature of the house-sparrows. These were ready, after a very

little perching and chirping on the nest-wall, to essay the long flight down on wings that would not carry them as many yards as the young house-martins' wings would carry them miles. And once on the ground they soon learned to peck for themselves in intervals of the meals brought to them by their parents, who, with all their faults, were undeniably kind to their children. And with the pecking and tasting came thoughts of the gull and of his dish of scraps, and with young appetites they hopped chirpingly towards it. The gull saw them; he knew their intentions in a moment, and crouched, as a "thick-knee" plover crouches so as to become almost a part of the bare Norfolk ground. The little birds came on; and already a callow bill was over the edge of the dish when a yellow yawn came rushing at the fledgeling, and by the time the yawn was finished there was a young sparrow less in the world, unless the world be taken to include the cast-iron interior of our gull.

In this manner the marauding little sparrows came to a bad end,—bad for them, and bad, as might have been thought, for our gull. But it seemed as if nothing was too difficult for his digestion, and all alike agreed with him. Head-first and quite alive he swallowed any living thing that was not too large to pass his gullet,

and he was looked on with favour by Authority for his service of ridding the garden of every sort of vermin. Best of all he loved small fishes or the worms that live in the salt mud which the tide left bare; and we spent many hours hunting, for his sake, the big-headed little fishes in the pools among the rocks, or digging, ankle deep in the ooze, for worms in the mudbanks of the river. Even the little green crabs were not amiss to him. He would crash the armour of their backs with one dig of his great yellow bill, peck out the soft body of the crab at his leisure and proceed to the discussion of the limbs, until nothing was left but some shelly fragments which might have been the relics of a thrush's feast around a snail-breaking stone.

On a sad morning he was found dead, rent asunder and mangled. There was little doubt about the manner of his death; the cat had stolen upon him unawares in his sleep, and disabled him at the first onset. It seemed certain that he had been taken unawares, for the cat knew him too well to meet him in open fight. She behaved badly to him with feline treachery; but, after all, she had been very much tried. We were convinced it was not so much animosity, nor hunger, that moved her to treat him thus, but rather a curiosity, that was half scientific and half gastronomic, to ascertain

if those mice which disappeared so quickly and so marvellously were really to be found inside him. This would explain the process of dissection to which she had subjected his body; but it is very doubtful, knowing what one does of his digestion, if she found an atom of evidence, in the shape of unassimilated food, to satisfy her thirst for knowledge.

It was not only in the service of the gull as aforesaid that we went digging in the river-mud for the worms. Using the worms as bait, we could, at certain seasons of the year and states of the tide, catch the little sea-bass which penetrated much farther than this up the tidal river. Farther down, nearer the river's mouth, we could catch much bigger bass, throwing a fly for them from a boat, or trailing a spinning-bait behind. But such an expedition meant a walk of two miles with the payment of a boatman and the hire of a boat at the end of it, and thus met with no encouragement from Authority, who always looked upon fishing somewhat with the eyes of Doctor Johnson; and without the assistance of Authority the hire of boat and boatman was hard to come by.

But far out on a promontory of rock jutting into the river, not half a mile from our home, we could sit with rod and line, "a worm at one

end and——" well, ourselves at the other; and at the lowest of the tide the little silvery bass would sometimes take the worms greedily, so that we often brought home quite a good basket. There was no nonsense of playing the fish, or anything of that kind about it; the float went under, we struck, we said "Come, fish!" hoisted him into the air and swung him back to fall with a sound whack on the rock behind us. Then there was the joy of disengaging the fish from the hook and putting on another worm; then again, the *otium cum dignitate* of sitting and watching the float, with the proud knowledge of a fish already caught awaiting us in the basket.

The most troublesome part of this sport was the digging for the worms. Far away, by the shores of the sea, it was possible to find these worms without the trouble of digging for them in the soft filthy ooze; for there, just where the rock-bed joined the flat golden sand, was a mass of coral-like formation. It looked much like honeycomb, only, when the comb, which was very friable, was broken, instead of bee-grubs and honey, it was seen to contain worms very like those which we got with much greater labour in the mud flats. Certainly the bass did not seem to know the difference. But if the labour of digging was saved, we had the labour

of a two mile walk to reach the sandy-coral, and moreover, unless we hit off nicely the lowest state of the tide, we found the coral covered.

This fishing for the bass was of common enough kind, nor was the capture of the bigger bass from the boat in any way unusual. Also, when Authority sometimes took us long drives and set us on the bank of a trout-stream with rod and artificial fly, the result was much hooking of clothes and of trees and very little hooking of fish; in short, such a result as the early efforts of the fly-fisher familiarly produce. But there was a fishing in which we took certain part that was rather out of the common kind. It was introduced to us by the coastguard-men, who had often practised it from ship-board.

The enterprise of certain capitalists, who had vainly sought to spoil our beautiful marshland and gorse-clad hills into a watering-place, had built an ineffectual pier out into the sea; ineffectual because, by reason of the waves, the rocks, and the ridge-boulders, it was impossible for a boat to come to it oftener than three days on an average in the year. But it was charming to bathe off. The same arrangement of rocks and weather which made it hard for a boat to come to land made the task of the coast-guard almost one of supererogation. The poor men grew fat to corpulence and it must

have been weary, in the winter-time, pacing along those cliffs with never the remotest prospect of a smuggler. So then they spied this pier, and it occurred to them to fish from it as they had used to do from the ship's deck. This would help to pass the nights, for the fish bite best at night; and it was necessary that they should be kept awake in the night somehow, or they would not have been able to sleep all day.

The way of the fishing was this:— the tackle was stout and the hook large and strong, for the fish had to be hauled from the water right up to the pier-head; the bait was the side of a herring, or one of those little big-headed fish which we caught in the pools of the rocks. As near the hook as you dared to put it was a heavy plumb of lead. The coast-guard would have his line (something between the thickness of blind-cord and of a lady's little finger) lying in a coil at his feet. Then, when he had got his hook baited, and all ready, he would sing out "Stand clear!" and all of us who were tending to other lines would stand back from his scene of action. He would begin by swinging the lead-plumb to and fro like a pendulum until he had given it sufficient impetus, when he would begin to whirl it round his head, gradually letting out more line and increasing the circle, until it was flying round and round at a tremendous pace; he would then let it

go, with a whizz, as the Gauchos in our books hurled their *bolas*, and it flew hurtling out to sea, uncoiling the line as it went. Into the water it plunged with a plop, taking down with it the baited hook, and so you left it until a spasmodic pulling told your excited nerves that a foolish fish had hooked itself.

All this we saw dimly, in a mysterious gloom that heightened its interest, either by the light of the moon or, when the night was dark, by the ray of a bull's-eye lantern. Sometimes, when fish would not bite, we lowered a lantern by a rope to the water's edge, in the hope that its glare would attract the prey; but we seldom found the fish unwilling, provided we hit off the right state of the tide,—namely, an hour before or after its highest. We had about two hours and a half, in all, of profitable fishing, and in that time would have hauled up all sorts of wonders,—great big congers, skates of mighty breadth, rock-cod, and dog-fish more than enough. When the dog-fish were in great plenty we seldom caught other fish, these shark-like demons seeming to scare away the rest. These were great nights, though sometimes the wind blew cruelly; but Authority did not often permit us to enjoy them. If the height of the tide fell early, no objections were made; but if the fishing-hours were among the small ones of

the morning a wise veto was put on our joining in the sport. In those unhappy seasons we would often stroll down in the course of the following day and, if the cold were not too nipping, would go diving down into the water at the pier's end to fetch up a dog-fish or two for our tame gull, whose healthy appetite made no distinction between the species of fishes. No one else would eat the dog-fish. The coastguardmen contented themselves with battering in their heads and throwing them over the pier-rails to serve as ground-bait : but nothing came amiss to our gull.

CHAPTER VI

THE SILVER OTTER

One of the brightest days in all our retrospect is that of which we spoke for many a year after as "The Silver Otter Day." He was a very famous beast on one of those streams within reach of our home, which the otter-hounds sometimes visited, and again and again he had been hunted, been viewed, and had eluded them.

Old and wise as Satan, and by repute scarcely less wicked, it did not seem that the biggest or wiliest of the trout or peal could escape him. He was a connoisseur of connoisseurs. The very daintiest bit of the shoulder was his portion, the rest he left to scavengers, such as water-rats. There was no bend or holt of the river which he had not tried; not a lady throughout all its course to whom he had not paid his addresses. And who was likely to refuse them? That silvery grey patch on the left ear whereby he was known to all of them, which had earned him his name with the humans who came to hunt him—who could withstand it?

And now he had taken his abode beneath the stump and roots of a tree which had been felled beside the river bank, where the stream runs deepest and with muddiest bottom. There he can laugh at humans and canines.

Four miles down the stream a strange concourse, of which ourselves, in our own opinion, make no inconsiderable part, is gathering in the meadow still pearly with the dew of dawn. There are men in queer garments, in blue coats with red waistcoats, blue breeches and red stockings. In front of each blue cap is an otter's pad. There are seven couples of hounds, too—a motley crowd, for the most part foxhounds, but a few have the deep bloodhound-like jowl, the high-peaked head, the drooping ears, and the rough, harsh coats of the real old otter hound. There are two or three terriers tearing at the chains by which men hold them. Some of the men have poles, iron-tipped; one, the whip, has a crop; one, the huntsman, a horn. This is the active contingent.

Besides, there is a crowd of camp-followers, men in tweed breeches and knickerbockers, labourers in fustian and corduroy; even ladies, some of them in the uniform of the Hunt, all in short skirts, and not one of them above helping to stop a ford to block the otter back.

All this — four miles down the stream.

Meanwhile our friend with the silver ear is at home from his night's outing, purring in the holt beneath the felled tree. Neither party knows much about the other's presence, though each may be thinking a deal.

Then the man with the horn blows a blast, and the hounds flock away to him to the river-side. Away after them, on either bank, come the men in blue and scarlet, the ladies, the camp-followers, all walking at best speed. Of the hounds the more eager dash into the water, the wiser and cooler deem it enough to nose each bush and likely crevice on this side the river or that. So, over two fields of pasture, the ladies climbing the stout fences manfully, and the bullocks coming down in an aggressive phalanx on the hounds, then turning and breaking as they find the enemy advance in their despite. Still the hounds are mute, save for the stricken yelp of a laggard corrected by whip-cord.

But now there is a whimper, and another, and a little "tow rowing" to which the hounds all gather and dash at score across a neck of pasture left by the looping river. There is a great scrambling of hounds and splashing around a fallen pollard, but no real, bounding, full-throated enthusiasm.

"Been 'ere teu nights agone," says an old oracle sagely.

"Two nights, Causey, is it?" asks one of the Hunt. "How do you know that? Isn't that the night I saw you coming out of the 'Ring o' Bells'?"

Causey is half otter himself. A fisherman all his days and nights too, when he is not ferreting nor poaching, a cunning man at the tieing of flies, for sale, at the concoction of other baits for personal use, at making a "gentleman from London" believe he is showing him the best fishing in the river, and in keeping the best of his knowledge to himself.

He scornfully passes over the reference to the "Ring o' Bells." "'Tis larnin' as does it," he answers, "larnin', and a knowledge of the ways of the dumb brutes."

"Do you think that old silver otter's up here this year?"

"'E might be, sir," Causey answers, again with the greatest solemnity. "Or again 'e might not. There's no dependence on un."

"How do you mean, Causey?" for the old man's tone had been full of significance.

"'Tis according as the zilver otter wishes, sir. Ef he wishes, 'e 'll be 'ere; ef he don't wish, 'e 'll be somewheres else. And," sinking his voice to a low whisper, "ef 'tis 'im as we'm come out after, us may all as well go 'ome."

"Why's that, Causey? Do you think he's a witch?"

"I don't think it, sir—I knows it."

"How do you know it?"

But Causey will not part with the sources of his knowledge. He has stated the fact, and that should be enough. If sundry nods and winks and lip-pursings are not sufficient enlightenment, the world will get no more.

So the chase goes on. More "tow rowing" in spasmodic intervals, more fence-climbing for the ladies, more bullocks half-heartedly charging in close column. Meanwhile the scene and the morning meadow scents are glorious; the rippling river and the dashing hounds give life to it. The excitement is growing, too, as across now one and now another promontory of the meadow the hounds dash with a chorus which grows louder as they go.

"That's a last night's trail for sure," says one who knows, as the melody breaks forth in a more emphatic crash. "Those foxhounds never lie."

They have all the best of it, those foxhounds. They are quicker, surer; dash with more *élan* into the water. Only, one would not willingly part with the wise, uncouth aspect of the otter-hounds and their tremendous bloodhound melody. Has the old fellow with the silver ear heard it yet beneath the great tree-stump?

But now the hounds are dashing with a great strong scent up a side watercourse, to the

despair of the hunters on the far side of the main stream. A few stalwart ones ford it and haste after the rest, who are close following the hounds, for if by chance the quarry should have lain up here, in this little trickle of a stream, his days are numbered.

"Pooh," says one, "he's not here. He's gone up into the decoy."

For, a field or two off, there is a duck decoy, now disused, and this watercourse is the outlet of its waters to the main stream.

A hound makes a hungry dash at a moorhen, distressed at finding herself so far up-country. But he misses her by six inches with his snap, and on he goes with the rest—on over the breadth of a pasture field which a road bounds. The watercourse dives through a broad made drain, and peeps up, like Arethusa, beyond it. The hounds are through it, in full tongue, but the field are checked—caught up in a brambly fence on this side or that of the road. All, with infinite pain, struggle over; whereon the deep-throated music stops, dead short, like an unfinished song. The huntsman lets his hounds cast, by themselves, up the watercourse—to no purpose. He summons them to him with blast of the horn, and tries the field on either side of the stream. All is sad silence.

"He's found it too dry and gone back," says

one, and the theory finds reluctant acceptance.

Back again, then, over the two stiff fences, and so to the main stream, to the joy of the laggards on its further bank. Then up the course of the river once more, and soon, with voices growing more clamorous, the hounds are again on the true scent up nearer and nearer to the holt of the old silver-eared one beneath the great tree-stump. Again and again a hound dashes, boldly leaping, into mid-stream, startling into flashing life a darkly slumbering pool. Every great bole of pollard willow is hunted with curious care. The hounds would fain dash on, in full cry, across the promontories of the many-looping river; but the cautious huntsman calls them back with his horn. It may be the cunning beast has gone up stream across one of the necks of land, then turned back and be lying in some favourite home in the bend. It is better to make all good as we go up.

Still there is no life of any amphibious thing in view, save here and there a moorhen flapping, with trailing feet, over the water, or a water-rat busily swimming for his hole. But now at length we are coming to the great stump, and he within is pricking up that short rounded silvery ear as the music grows nearer, louder, till the storm of canine fury breaks upon the strong doors of his

house, and the hounds are clamouring, digging, hustling one another at every one of its land-gates or water-gates, the bolt holes above the water-line or below it.

He laughs, for he is not afraid. The roots of the great tree are his rafters, which will need mighty digging, not only with spade and pick-axe, but even with the cleaving axe. The stream is deep, too, before his water-gates, and its bed muddy; there is no foothold for a man to stand and dig, or to poke at him with long sticks, as is the well-known vexatious way of men. So he bides his time and does not budge, in spite of all the clamour; in spite, too, that men come together and stamp in unison over the rafters of his home, then retire, calling off the hounds, to see if he can be tempted out to discover what earthquakes are occurring. He knows these well-worn tricks too well. He waits.

Then they come back, hounds and men, again, casting up stream and down in case he shall have slipped out by an under-water way, unseen. But they return unsatisfied. Next one of the tugging, yelping terriers is loosed. Down the dark hole he goes as if shot from a cannon. The silver-eared one has his tactics for him too. He presents a pair of snake-like jaws, grips his guest, as in a rat-trap, across the jowl; then looses him, to speed his parting. An angry

growl or two is his answer, and then the terrier, for he is game, closes for the second round. This time he gets a pinch of otter skin—a pinch, no more, for in a moment he is shaken off, and pinned in scientific fashion, to make the pattern even, on the other jowl. Again he retires, expostulating but disinclined for action, bethinks him that he is short of breath, and makes for change of air outside.

Another guest, of similar manners, meets with a like reception, and retires, sooner satisfied. But now, from the neighbouring farm, men come with spades, with picks, with axes. They dig until they come to the hard root-rafters; then chop and chop with the axe. Still the old fellow with silver ear listens and makes no move. His defences will hold out a while yet. Round and about the great stem, now in the water, now out, the hounds keep baying, the otter hounds digging with a more steady persistency, as their nature is, than the foxhounds.

At length the crumbling earth about him, and the close sounding strokes of the pick, wake the silver ear to quicker apprehension. The time is come, he thinks. By the lowest of his water-gates, where the stream is most opaquely stirred from its muddy depths, he dives silently out—silently, unperceived. For a while the digging and the clamour of the hounds stays about the

tree-stump; but soon, by chance or fate, a hound comes on his scent; for even he, old and wily and silver-eared as he is, is bound to breathe out from his lungs as he goes beneath the water. Then, as the discovery is proclaimed, the pack close round, and dashing into the mid-stream swim downwards after him.

"Gone away," is the human echo of their cry, and now men post themselves, leaning over the stream, by each overhanging bush or pollard, where is most likelihood of his coming up for breath. Little enough of him will most see, scarcely even that silver ear, for a nostril above the stream's surface will suffice him for taking the air he needs. But he has found for himself a halcyon place, as he thinks it, amidst some thick-growing sedges. There he dares to lift from the water all that cunning head of his, to gaze a moment, unseen as he deems, at his enemies, and to listen to their war-cry. Long ago, before ever the digging and battering at the otter's house roof began, old Causey had stationed himself on the bank opposite that bed of sedges; and as the low grey head raised itself gently among their shelter old Causey raised himself too, as gently, on his elbow. The old otter spied him, and in an instant was under water, but Causey "Tally-hoed," and "Tally-hoed" again with an emphasis which no ordinary

occasion would have wrung from so old a sportsman.

"'Tis 'im, sir!" he cried. "'Tis 'im again!" as the huntsman with the horn hurried to his halloo. "'Tis th' old witch, th' old zilver otter again. Zure's fate it is."

"Where did you see him, Causey?—exactly where?"

"Jist there, sir. Bezide the big zedge, sir. Jist there, as zure's fate. Us may all as well go 'ome. 'Tis the same one."

"Go home be—everythinged!" the master yelled, hunting his hounds to the spot shown. And now they are in the water again and among the sedges, dashing great flags this way and that with joyous music. Down stream again he is, and as the hounds swing off, in a long trailing line, another man views him again below—but no grey head and silver ear this time, only the black tip of a nose gently thrust above the surface.

And so on, up and down the stream the hounds go—now baying with the clear voice of full conviction, now swimming or dashing along the bank, silently at fault, continually drawn this way or that as a man views the quarry. Below, the hunters are arrayed in a long line across the shallows to prevent his breaking down; but the silver-eared one has no need to do that. In the

broad, deep, muddy pool outside his house door he may find safe hiding enough for a while yet. Once he is viewed low down, almost down to the shallow; but the next view of him is away up stream, and not a hound has as yet had a nip at him.

After that there is a long spell of silence, neither hounds have scented him nor men viewed him. They have tried back at the old holt again; but there is no sufficient clamour of the hounds to prove more than his recent occupation. Where can he be? Causey does not know, all the more willing than ever since this disappearance to advance the theory of his witchcraft. All are at fault.

Further up stream they had been making hay, until the joy of hunting the silver-eared one had drawn them away from their occupation. An occasional carelessly tossed wisp came floating down the stream. A little gleaning had clung round the trailing boughs of a drooping pollard.

"Will 'ee lend me yer pole a moment?" Causey asked a member of the Hunt. "Thank 'ee, sir."

He leaned out over the slanting stem, reached to the wisp of sodden hay, and lifted it, like the tress of a drowned woman's hair, on the pole's end.

"I told ee zo!"

Now Causey had not told a single soul about it; but his action gave him every justification for the use of the famous phrase, for there, instantly as he lifted the draggled wisp, sank out of view the tiny bright eyes and the silver ear.

"Tally-ho! Tally-ho! 'E wunk at me. Sure's fate he wunk."

Then away went hounds and huntsmen again, and away all the field, down stream, following a bright line of silvery bubbles rising from the surface. And now they had him at a certain disadvantage, for he was caught in the bend of the river, cornered as it seemed. He had stayed there, beneath that wisp of hay, who could say how long, breathing at his ease, while the sodden hay scent baffled the hounds; and there might have stayed till evening came, had Causey only been in his accustomed seat at the Ring o' Bells. But now he was startled out, and his enemies were close upon him, leaping after him in the shallows, driving him to the bank. So up the bank he ran, amidst the wild shouts of the field as they noted his famous markings, up the bank a little way and even into the meadow for a yard or two. That was enough for him. He knew he was no match for his foes on foot, but by that movement he had turned their flank and stole

into water again below the nose of the lowest hound.

And now a loose-running terrier, who had sighted him on land, came racing after him, and with one bound was on his back as he entered the water. He turned deftly, and with a grip of his jaws made the dog, less amphibious, loose his hold. But it took an instant's time, and in that instant a hound closed on him; but could not hold him; and again the silvery bubbles went gaily down the stream, and all hounds and field in chorus after them.

Then there was silence. No one viewed him; no hound spoke to him with any emphasis of conviction. Low down, after a while, a boy "tally-hoed" him, but later confessed with shame that it might have been a water-rat.

At length, when despair and gloom were settling on field and hounds alike, there came again a cheering halloo. This time it was high, high up, close to the great tree-stem again and it was out of the thickness of some water weeds that they had seen the black snout peep up. So again all was joy and clamour, and they hunted and dashed, and again a hound got a nip, but they never viewed him again by head-mark; and then, yet again, all was silence.

Now men were very tired and very hungry, for it was four o'clock and there had been no

pause for luncheon, and the hounds shared in their mood and hunted listlessly; and it was clear that if an end was to be made it must be speedily. Some said the otter had been badly nipped—likely, they said, he was drowned. The miller should be asked to let off the water, then they would find him in the river bed. Causey sniffed.

So all went and feasted under a great tree. Men changed certain nether garments, under cover of a hedge; ladies, some said, changed theirs under cover of another; but this is one of those mysteries which no man knows.

In the meantime the miller let off all the water, and the river bed grew quite dry. Then they found, drowned, as had been surmised, and stranded, an otter indeed—but such an otter! He had no size to boast of—young pads, feeble jaw, above all no silver ear.

"I told you he was drowned, Causey," the master said.

"What's drownded?" Causey asked sourly.

"The otter, of course. There he is."

"The otter! What otter?"

"We must have changed him, of course. There must have been two otters under that tree stem. The silver-eared chap must have gone back in that last long check and turned out another."

"Do ee think zo?" said Causey with sour scorn. "I tell ee there was no teu otters. *Us* never changed otters. 'Twas the zilver otter —he changed hisself."

And whether he did or no, it is on the record that he was never seen again.

CHAPTER VII

FIRST DAYS WITH THE GUN

When we were boys the season of the year which promised the most glorious possibilities was that inclement time of mid-winter in which it was likely that we might be blessed with a heavy fall of snow. The cold weather drives most wild things nearer the haunts of man and the crumbs thrown, in charity, from his window and the scraps, in carelessness, from his back-door. The big woods then are but skeletons, save for the perennial foliage of an occasional fir. The wealth of their leafage is stripped, and the birds find better covert in those great fences of the western counties where the yellow grasses make a tangle with the bare limbs of thorn and hazel and bramble.

At such a season each sheltered nook of the hedge-banks, where the overhanging grass gave some sort of a shelter from the east wind, would be occupied by a field-fare or red-wing feebly scratching where the soil was least frostbound,

feebly flying thence with stiff wings over the snow, soon to return to the sheltering bank, and again to be hunted forth. In a hard winter we would kill many, would find many dead already, without any effort of ours, dead of cold and of lack of food. How was food to be got by these creatures with their soft bills, when all the world was iron-bound in frost beneath a coverlet of snow? Then, too, it was that we might hope to track to its form a rabbit, and running to our friend, the gardener of our next neighbour (our close and well-beloved friend, because he had a gun), bring him to steal over the snow and shoot the rabbit in his form, even as he sat. We had not the slightest doubt that this friend of ours was one of the very finest shots; in fact, it is not too much to say that we deemed him the finest shot in all the world, with his single-barrelled muzzle-loader which he loaded with such infinite care and pain. In the first place he quite gave us to understand that there were no better shots; and in the second place we cannot recall that we ever saw him miss, which is a great deal to say. It is true that one can now recognise that his ambition was moderate; he never committed the imprudence of risking his reputation by firing at an object that moved; he always waited until it stopped. Neither did he fire then without prolonged aim, the gun being

very slowly raised, held to the shoulder an immensely long time, with the left eye hermetically closed the while. A wider knowledge has led us to place others before him merely as marksmen; but as a stalker he was certainly skilful, for, though a very large, heavy man, he would creep down a hedge-side making himself "as small as a rat," according to his own simile, or, at all events, so small that the wood-pigeon, contemplating the face of nature from the top branches of the high elm-tree which grew out of the hedge-bank, did not observe him neither while he crept down along the hedge, nor while he slowly raised his single-barrelled gun and took his long, monocular aim; nor, indeed, was aware of any hostile presence until it found itself, in response to the thundering discharge of the heavily-loaded piece, tumbling head-downwards through the tree, with a wonderful inability to avoid the branches and a refusal on the part of its wings to give it any sort of aerial support. So the deadly marksman picked it up and finished it off by giving its head a few taps on the gun-barrel, while we hurried up to compliment him as his skill deserved and to admire the beautiful pearly tints on the pigeon's neck. Had these been his only achievements,—the killing of the wood-pigeons and of the rabbits which we marked down for him in the snow—

we might have thought less highly of his prowess than we did, for on these occasions he always took the quarry. But in return he would always shoot for us any bird whose bright plumage or other qualities (which were not edible) made it precious to us. All quarry useful for the pot he took home with him to cheer his little red-cheeked children; but he was always ready to expend powder and shot, in economical measure, on small birds for our museum of Natural History.

The appearance of the red-wings and field-fares coincidently with the severe weather from which they seemed to suffer so badly, gave us much food for speculation. We could understand the ways of the swallows and warblers, who came to us in the summer, and flew for the winter to warmer lands; we could even have understood the manners of these migratory thrushes if they had seemed to enjoy the cold. But clearly they did not: multitudes died of the severe weather; yet we were told that in the summer time, when our weather was warm, these birds sought colder climes. It all seemed very inexplicable then, and we could only conjecture that these were very foolish creatures who did not know what was good for them. Later we grew to learn that the movements of birds are determined by questions of food rather

than of temperature; though doubtless the supplies of food are under the influence of temperature, and so too, indirectly, the birds. And we might have known further, had we ever read the newspapers, and had the papers of that date taken to publishing the weather-reports among their daily news, that the thrushes did not congregate in our neighbourhood only when our weather was cold, but also, and more particularly, when it was cold weather to the eastward, and generally over the island. Then, finding the ground hard to their bills, they would keep pushing down to the milder climate of the western counties where they would be more likely to find their food in a soil that was not iron-bound. This question of supply seems to be at the root of most of the movements of birds, and if thoroughly understood might explain much that is yet obscure. No one, for instance, has yet explained (to the satisfaction of any but himself) the hard and fast line which the nightingale has drawn across England as the western boundary of his migration; and though he sings night and day he tells us nothing of his reasons.

It is with shame we have to confess that we cannot remember the first occasion of our firing a gun, though we can well recall the manner in which it was pressed to the right shoulder by a

grown man standing behind, while his arm guided us to hold the barrel at the proper angle. Our dog, Viper, remembers those first great occasions, looking back out of the dim shadow-land of the dog's hereafter; we can be confident that he remembers, for his wild excitement over them, his yelps and bounds, are sensible presences to us now. Whether we killed or no, is also forgotten, and the nature of the quarry we aimed at. But there remains a conviction that we kept our eyes open, unlike our friend the gardener; and that was even more creditable in those days than it is now, for if the cap fitted loosely you were very likely to get some stray powder blown into your eye.

The loading of a gun was no small thing for a boy to learn at that remote period. It was not a mere matter of opening the breech and fitting in a cartridge. First the powder had to be poured in, and a wad rammed down upon that; then the shot and another wad; finally the cap had to be put on the nipple, after carefully noting that the nipple-hole was not blocked, and that the grains of powder were peeping up ready for ignition. If the hole was in any way blocked it was necessary to search out the obstruction with a pin. It was highly desirable, moreover, that each step in the loading should be taken in its own order. Obviously it was a bad plan to

pour in the shot before the powder, or ram down a wad first of all; but it was above all things impressed upon us that the cap should be put on last. Authority very properly represented that, if the hammers should be released by the jar of ramming, no harm would be done if the detonating cap were not on the nipple; whereas, if the hammer descended on the cap while we were in process of ramming home, it was likely that the ramrod would be fired right through the rammer's body, so far as that body should remain recognisable. In point of fact we never did know a hammer to be released by the ramming, but no doubt there was a chance of it in cheap guns with inferior locks. Authority had every justification of its wisdom in this regard.

It was a tedious business, this loading, in ordinary; but how immensely more exasperating when one was in the middle of a covey nicely scattered among the turnips, and getting up, one by one, all round. Not that any such fortune as this was ever ours in the early days of our shooting with the gun. The first mark at which we practised was the flame of a candle in a room. We soon learned to snuff this out with the blow of the cap at a considerable number of paces. Next we began to wage war against all the small birds in the familiar haunts, and, shooting them sitting without any sense of shame, soon found

our hands more than full of taxidermy. We recognised one disadvantage in the use of the gun, namely that the quarry that fell to it was usually more badly mangled than had been the case with the victims of the catapult. The latter fell to a single pellet; the former often received a dozen. Nevertheless we appreciated that the muzzle-loader was a far more deadly weapon, though by this time the sticks of our favourite catapults were so jagged with commemorative notches, that they felt something like the surface of a fir-cone. But with the gun one might hope for such large quarry! Rabbits and wood-pigeons were now no longer above our ambitions. A wood-pigeon, indeed, was one of our earliest triumphs. At the foot of the kitchen-garden was a bed of winter cabbages, and whenever the snow made other food hard to come by the wood-pigeons loved to settle among those juicy leaves. The upper windows of the house commanded this bed, and if from that point of vantage one saw certain grey forms moving among the cabbage-tops as they peeped up through their coverlet of snow, then forthwith, rushing to that beloved room on the ground floor, one would proceed to the hasty loading of the gun with its heaviest charge of powder and biggest shot,—for wood-pigeons were very large game indeed, and their feathers strong and bony. Of course,

in four cases out of five, by the time this long process had been accomplished, the pigeons had been frightened away; or Viper, defeating all attempts to elude him, would come barking with joy at the sight of the gun; or Authority would throw open a window (with noise enough to scare away every bird within miles) just to ask, out of sheer idle impertinence, where one was going. But on the fifth attempt none of these exasperating misadventures happened. Boyhood crept unnoticed of Authority, of Viper, or of pigeons, over the snowy lawn, up to the quickset thorn hedge of the kitchen-garden, peeped through a partial gap in the fence, saw three beautiful wood-pigeons (more big and beautiful, to Boyhood's seeming, than pigeons had ever appeared before), quietly, contentedly, and unsuspiciously walking hither and thither among the cabbages and picking wedges out of the leaves. Then Boyhood, with its heart going at a prodigious pace, raised the gun, and, poking it through the gap, brought it to bear on the nearest pigeon. *Bang!* and there is a flapping of great wings; pigeons go cleaving their way up into the grey sky,—only two pigeons, and on the ground there had been three! The smoke is clearing; yes—there a pigeon really lies! Even from here the red line can be seen pulsing from his neck and staining the snow. It is infinitely

tantalising to have to run round a hundred yards, for this quickset hedge is not negotiable; it is very hard to believe (so accustomed does Boyhood grow to disappointment) that the pigeon really will be there by the time the cabbages are reached. Yet there the pigeon is, sure enough: no miracle, as one had expected, had been wrought to carry it away; and Boyhood soon is assured by holding in eager hands its warm, beautiful, solid body. There is no doubt about it; Boyhood has killed a wood-pigeon, and henceforward will go about among its fellows feeling at least two inches taller. It is wonderful what a sufficing joy that wood-pigeon affords for a whole day at least. One does not so much want to go forth and kill another as to stay at home and look at this one, to stroke it and feel it, and make sure that it is real. One is so busied, for the day, with admiration, that not until the morrow can one find time for the more practical business of skinning it. The cook has promised that she will dress the body afterwards, though she consents with a certain shamefacedness, as though she deemed it a little indelicate to exercise her professional functions on a carcase thus denuded. But after the pigeon has been skinned, and his body eaten, Boyhood awakes to the fact that there are still other wood-pigeons in the world: the one that has

been killed becomes merely a delightful memory; and wood-pigeons in the flesh and feathers, still to be killed, are once again the great realities of life.

No step in life appears so great as this, in the retrospect, since the day that one killed one's first small bird. That former step was biggest of all; for by it one became, out of a boy who had killed nothing, a boy who had killed a bird. The latter step made a boy who had killed a wood-pigeon out of a boy who had killed blackbirds and thrushes; it was immense, but it did not add so infinitely to one's self-respect as the other. By the former, one became something, whereas one had been nothing; but by the latter one merely became something bigger, whereas one had been something less. The former step made a difference in kind; the latter, merely in degree.

But it was a difference not merely in degree, but in kind, to have become a boy whose natural weapon was the gun, instead of a boy whose natural weapon was the catapult. For the present the world seemed to have nothing to offer us that was not within our reach. Our ambition took wings. Hitherto the modest circuit of the garden, the orchard, and the neighbouring fields, with occasional excursions to a certain well-beloved wood, had sufficed for us.

Now, fully armed with a double-barrelled gun, this restricted area seemed quite insufficient. There was, at times, much to attract one even in these few fields. Starlings would come in big flocks in the winter-time: there were wood-pigeons, as has been seen, to be had for the stalking; and there were a few rabbits in the great bank of the stream which wandered down to the river, but these rabbits, from constant hunting, were of preternatural acuteness. Yet all these were attractive quarry, and edible,—which was an added charm, for nothing is more fascinating to Boyhood than to find itself being fed and satisfied by the prey that has fallen to its own hunting; it puts Boyhood into immediate touch and kinship with the hunters and trappers of the story-books. In the hard weather, too, there were the field-fares and the red-wings, which were an easy prey and excellent for the pot. Times begin to be hard for the kitchen-maid when Boyhood goes gunning in the winter and expects all that he kills to be plucked.

Our favourite wood, though we were given free access to it for bird-nesting, and though tacitly we were permitted to do our worst in it with the catapult, was great Taboo to the gun. But some two miles from home, where the river goes out into the sea, was a great marshy common or burrows, with sand-hills on the seaward side,

which seemed as if it were made to be a perpetual joy to gunning Boyhood. Being common-land, all had a right of access and of shooting; there was no preservation. And if the birds and creatures that frequented it were made wondrous cunning by the constant persecutions of the long-shore gunners, their wiliness made them only the more attractive quarry to a boy to whom a snipe and a brace of sandpipers seemed a tolerable reward for a day of toil. Had this been the maximum of the possible bag it is likely, indeed, that even Boyhood at its keenest might have wearied. The delightful thing about it was that there was no maximum, no limit; one might kill any number of things; the prospect was infinite. For besides the common-land proper, there were marshy meadows adjoining, over which one had virtually an equal right of shooting, for they were so far from houses that we were little likely to be interfered with. And in some of these meadows we had known of a covey of partridges which Boyhood could pursue, with beating heart and utter unconcern of such mundane restrictions as game-licenses, a whole day long. Once, even, a far-wandering cock-pheasant had been seen in one of the tangled hedgerows. Then, away out at the other side of the common was a great bed of tall sharp rushes whose stems were

multitudinously adorned with cocoons of the six-spot burnet moth; and among these one has seen, in fleeting glimpses, the form of a hare ("as big as a great donkey," in Joe's phrase),—has seen, but has never slain, so that there remains the continual expectation of seeing again. Among the sand-hills, too, were many burrows of rabbits and some of them not untenanted. Some of them had curious tenants, not of the furry four-footed nature of their excavators, but duck-billed, mottled, web-footed birds; sheldrakes, in fact, which in that country are called burrow-ducks for choice.

In the midst of this great common of marsh-land was a big shallow pond fed by the streams which came down from the furze-clad steeps above the cliffs from which we took the jackdaws. A sluggish, muddy-bottomed river led from this pond to the estuary. It was in this pond that, long ago, before coming to years of gunning discretion, we had been wading after eels, while Viper looked on uneasily, like a hen at its ducklings, from the bank. A wedge-shaped ripple in the water came towards us, led by a black dot; the whole arrangement meaning a swimming water-rat, whose head formed the dot at the apex. A hand gripped at him, missed his head and his body, but grabbed him fast by the tail. He turned and gripped the small hand of the

grabber; but the grabber held tight, and so did the rat. Viper's excitement was fever-hot; so hot as nearly, but not quite, to induce him to take to the water, for which he had an almost feline distaste. Boy and rat came to the bank together, and not till Viper had the rat across the back did the little beast let go. Afterwards Boyhood got much praise for not letting the rat go when he was bit, though what harm he did any one in that pond is not evident. That, however, is the way of Authority; the generalities of Authority know no exception; rats are to be killed, boys are to be scolded, the devil is to be resisted—universally. Even in this sentence one has committed a serious error, for one used to be told that it showed "lack of reverence" to write the name of his Satanic majesty, in our Sunday exercises, with a small "d."

But neither rats nor eels had a monopoly of this great pond. Scarcely at any time could one look down upon it, as one came from the higher levels towards the marshland, that one did not see a heron standing sentinel-like in its shallows, motionless, but armed with deadly bayonet-bill, as numberless small eels and sticklebacks would find to their cost. In winter, if no shepherd or gunner had lately passed, there would be usually some mallard or widgeon, which even at a distance one might know from the tame ducks that

sometimes frequented it, by the apprehensive elevation of the heads. In very severe weather the black-necked geese would visit it, but this happened rarely. At such severe seasons, too, one would be very sure of finding snipe, sometimes in big whisps, in one of the meadows near by the common. We often thought that there must have been some peculiar warmth in the water of the little stream which sprang up in the midst of luxuriant cress and herbage in that meadow; for there the ground was always soft and boggy, even when iron-bound by the black frost elsewhere. Doubtless it was this quality that gave it its popularity with the snipe in the severest frost; they could scoop in safety here (for snipe do scoop rather than probe) in the assured hope of finding food without bruising their soft bills. When the snipe were most plentiful (that is to say, when they were in whisps) it was generally very difficult to get good shooting. They would rise, scolding with one voice, in such bewildering numbers that two barrels generally sent their contents among them harmlessly, and drove the birds climbing high into the air with wide wheelings, after which they would depart, once and for all, to some similar warm, wet place elsewhere. Sometimes they would continue for a while dashing backwards and forwards over one's head, giving

chances of repeated shots, but all difficult ones; the driven snipe is not an easy mark. It was more to be wished that there should be some half-dozen snipe, say, in the meadow. Then they would rise, not all together, like packed grouse, but one by one, allowing nice time for reloading; and it was perhaps Boyhood's greatest triumph that in this meadow we killed five snipe, all jacks, without a miss, in so short a space that all were on the ground at a time; we killed the last before we picked up the first. And we found them all! That was not the least part of the triumph, without a dog, in the thickest of all that lush herbage!

On the whole, a dog was more of a trial than a joy in the course of those expeditions. Here and there, it is true, he might be useful. On the way down to the common (just below the spot dear to our catapulting days, where the roadside stream was the constant haunt of a pied wagtail and, more rarely, of a yellow one) the tangle of hedge comes down very densely over the stream. Thence a dog has once or twice put up for us a moorhen,—put out would rather be the way to say it, for there was not much altitude about the bird's fluttering, scuttling progress. One could not depend on finding the moorhen here, for this was not his abiding-place; he only came here occasionally, following the course of this tributary of the bigger stream

that went beside the boundary-hedge of the common. In this stream, which was just of such breadth as is difficult to jump across, grew some very tall bulrushes, besides irises which were gloriously golden at the blossoming season, and a tangle of smaller water-weeds. Here was the real home of the moorhen, and here, too, snipe hid themselves, and could not be forced to quit cover without the help of a dog. In a stream which coursed over the common, parallel to this one, we have killed a dabchick, and have seen a grey phalarope which had been killed upon it; but never had the luck to see the latter rare bird alive. This was the stream that led down to the big river from the pond to which the wild duck loved to come. There was no growth of weed about it, and any bird-life that moved upon it had either swum down from the pond or up from the river.

Yet that is not an exact statement, if a king-fisher, fleeting like a blue flash over its surface, can be said to have moved upon it; for two bridges spanned the stream at distances of half a mile from each other, and from one of them the passer-by would always scare a king-fisher to send him scudding in a line of blue light to the shelter of the other. Often and often we fired at him; and though the shot has seemed sometimes to make a circular pattern on the

water with the blue body just above it for its centre, that blue body has ever gone on flashing down the stream, as if it created for itself a halcyon in the midst of leaden pellets like that the ancients used to say it made for itself among the waves. We held the superstition, which probably every boy shared with us, that the British Museum would give £100 for a perfect nest of the king-fisher; and often did we go a-wading in the shallow water, but deep mud, under those two bridges, in search of our golden prize. Of course we never found it. Likely enough the king-fisher nested there, but down some long hole among the stones to which our hands could not penetrate and which we soon tired of seeking in the discomfort and dirt of our wading. After all, as later experience and the South Kensington Natural History Museum has shown us, we should have discovered nothing really worthy of being called a nest, had we ever succeeded in invading the king-fisher's nursery. For his lodging seems to be on the cold ground, save for the embellishment of the few chance fish-bones which he, or his wife, or his children have been unable to digest; so that the superstition which sent us searching for these nests was about as useful as the advice to children to hold up a guinea-pig by the tail in order to see its eyes drop out.

Now all this great common was a game-preserve, according to the reckoning of game in a boy's category; for innumerable flocks of dunlins and the small ringed plover used to frequent it, and were not too wild to afford a shot,—a good family shot, too, into the *brown* of the flock, such as a boy loves. It took a quick eye to see these little birds at any distance, running over the ground, running all in the same direction, nearly always up-wind. Sometimes they would permit one to approach close enough for a shot on the ground, if one came to them not directly, but in a slanting direction, as if one meant to pass them by. But more often they would begin to raise their whistling cry, and run a little more quickly, just before gun-shot range was reached; then they would rise up, flying low for a yard or two in the wind's teeth, then drift away down it, showing the silvery sheen of their under parts. The moment of rising was the best at which to take them, if they were within range, for then they had their wings outstretched and the unprotected parts of their little bodies exposed to the shot; whereas, when on the ground, the strong wing-feathers were folded over them as a shield. But after the first shot the whole flock would rise up into the air and wheel about as if obedient to the word of command, at one moment

nearly invisible, when their dusky backs were towards the gunner; the next, flashing silver, as all showed their breasts in a simultaneous turn. In stormy weather, when the force of the wind made the exact angle of flight hard to determine, the flocks would sometimes come flashing close past one with lightning speed, making the whole air alive with their whistle and their movement. Then, a lucky snap-shot into their midst would sometimes bring down three or four to a single barrel; or sometimes, again, the shot would pass harmlessly through the midst of them as though they were under the special protection of a Providence unkindly to the boy.

Dunlins and small plover were not always the only quarry. Among them we would sometimes see noble forms, lifting their heads proudly aloft over the flock of smaller game, which we recognised, with beating hearts, for golden plover; but these great birds, speaking relatively, were always wilder, so that it scarcely ever happened to us to come within range of them. Occasionally, too, there were grey plover, and often starlings, but these latter we reckoned inferior quarry even to the dunlins.

After a while we began to study the manners of these birds more closely, and to observe that they came up to the common from the foreshore at certain times, namely when the inflowing tide

began to cover up the mud flats on which they had made such a tracery of lace-work with the impressions of their delicate feet. Then we began to lie in wait for them in their flight, ambushed in the scattered clumps of rushes which lay away from the big bed. Over these the flocks used to sweep in wheeling, snipe-like flight, affording us a chance of a quick shot at them as they went by. Curlew used occasionally to settle on the open spaces of the common, the wildest and wariest of all birds. There was but one way of coming near them, and that way failed fifty times for once that it succeeded. If you hid yourself seaward of the tall birds and sent a man to walk up to them,—not starting from your ambush, but from a point some hundred yards or so to one side of it—there was a chance that they would swing back over your head. For this was their custom, to rise at a distance of many gunshots and come swinging round on one or other side of the source of their fear, as if to examine it somewhat more closely but from the better and safer vantage-point which was given by being on the wing. In this way we killed one of the big curlew, and several of the lesser or whimbrel. At certain seasons of the year a small flock of these lesser curlew used to haunt the common and to be quite indifferent to our approach, so that we

could throw a stone among them; but this only happened just before the breeding season, when their thoughts were occupied with the great business of pairing, to the exclusion of all emotions of fear and ordinary prudence. We credited them with knowing that we had a conscience which forbade our shooting them at such a time; but probably this was assigning to them more than their due intelligence.

It will be sufficiently clear that these enterprises were not of the nature of those in which the assistance of a dog is at all useful; and even in the great rushes, which formed a thick enough covert in all conscience, a dog was rather a hindrance than a help. For all this country was common-ground, with a public right of shooting over it, and the result was that even the snipe and occasional hares which resorted to the big rush-bed were in such a state of watchfulness and wildness that the trouble was always rather to go delicately enough to avoid putting up the game at a distance than to get it to quit covert. In the rushes a good retriever, trained to keep well to heel, might have been useful, but such trained canine intelligence was never at our disposal.

South of the big rush-bed a step over a gravelly bank brought us to the foreshore. At spring-tides the salt water of the estuary came

right up to this bank, but at ordinary high-tides the mud flats were bare for a hundred yards or more, and were clothed with a growth of low, soft, succulent weed which was the favourite haunt of flocks of linnets We disdained to waste powder and shot on such small game; but once in the winter time we saw, among the linnets, a bird much of their own size,—in reality, as we found afterwards, it was somewhat larger—which was not one of them and seemed altogether unfamiliar to us. On the first occasion of their rising we did not fire at this stranger in their midst, but when we followed them after they had plumped down again, with innumerable twitterings, according to the manner of linnets, again the unfamiliar bird rose among them. This time one of us fired at him, and with true aim, for he fell among the weeds of the mud flat. When we picked him up we found him a bird altogether beyond our ken. The colouring of his upper parts was somewhat like a skylark's, and we knew enough of ornithology to class him at once among the larks by the great length of the claw upon his hindmost toe. But all the front of his breast was of a bright yellow, quite unlike any lark or pipit of which we had knowledge, and, half encircling his neck, was a black crescent with a horn pointing upwards on either side. We had

not a notion what the bird might be, never having seen him hitherto in the flesh, nor in the pictures in the bird books. We were greatly excited when we took him home, and still more elated when at length we succeeded in identifying him. He was a shore-lark; there was no possibility of mistaking such distinctive markings; and the book (let us refrain from mentioning its title) in which we discovered him, said that only four times had the shore-lark been recorded as killed in Great Britain. We wrote to "The Field," announcing our claim to fame as the fifth observer to make so rare a find, and were slightly disappointed by an editorial note to the effect that, though the bird was truly a rare visitor to Great Britain, the book in question was in error in saying that it had only four times been observed in this country, and that this error had been commented on in "The Field's" review of the book. Nevertheless it was a rare bird, the rarest which ever fell to any weapon of our wielding, and we were not a little proud of it. We have often regretted since, that we did not entrust its setting-up to hands more skilful than ours; but for many years it inhabited, a precious possession, a box with a glass front of our own fitting, and it is only lately that we have been compelled, with great reluctance, to confess that time has told too

heavily on our preservatives, and that all reasons, including sanitary ones, made it desirable that the shore-lark should be consigned to the ignominy of the dust-bin.

CHAPTER VIII

THE 'LONG-SHORE GUNNER

THERE was one strange character among the heroes of our boyhood, whom we used often to meet of an evening on our way home from that stretch of common and foreshore described in the last chapter. It was at that mysterious hour that he would generally be faring forth, with his long gun over his shoulder, from his cottage on the edge of the common. He was a rough-looking fellow, with curls of very black hair, tinged here and there with grey, escaping from beneath the fur cap that he often wore. When the weather was at its wildest and coldest, a "sou-wester" would replace the cap of fur. A velveteen coat, of voluminous tail-pockets, clad his upper man, and his legs were encased in trousers of common serviceable corduroy. His face was brown with the sunburn by day and buffeting of night winds, but its striking feature was the pair of dark and marvellously keen eyes, which shot one glance at us as he passed in silence.

He passed always in silence. We never won a word in response to our timid "Good evening," or wish that he might have good sport. Just the one glance was all he deigned us, then passed on, on his solitary way, over the dreary common. We knew where he was going,—to a *cache* among the sandhills fronting the sea, where he would lie in wait, warm in the hole he had dug in the soft white sand, and lined, like a nest, with the yellow bent grass that grew from it, until the ducks came flighting in, or a wandering curlew or plover might venture within reach of the long muzzle-loader. The village boys would look after him curiously, yet even the boldest and most cheeky would never dare to say a chaffing word of him, even when he had passed out of earshot, as was their way with folks whom they knew better or respected less.

But, in a sense, there could be no one whom they did know much better, for they had seen this solitary ever since the world began, as it seemed to them—that is to say, for as long as the memories of their brief lives could carry back. They had known him thus long, as long as they had known anything, and yet had never come to any closer personal knowledge of him than we had gathered from the sight of his figure and the single glance of his keen eyes. About him, by hearsay, they had learnt much,

nor were chary at all, on a little encouragement, of passing on to us what others, their elders, had told them. For the whole of his story I have to trust a good deal to hints picked up, and evidence on hearsay, so that I can relate it a great deal more succinctly than I gathered it.

This man, James Gordon—the very name was strange and outlandish in that corner of the country—had come into possession of his cottage on the common's verge at the death of an uncle. There he came and lived, and for a while was the gayest of the gay and the wildest of the wild, according to the gaiety and wildness of the little village. At the Red Lion bar his was the most joyous voice in song, the free-est hand in standing treat, the hardest head under the assaults of the insidious pots of small beer. At the annual Whitsun revel he was the favourite, and most bedecked with ribbons of the maidens. And when he took to wife the blue-eyed daughter of the village joiner, all were ready to prophesy, with happiest augury, of their union.

For, despite his wildness, his heart was good. So they all said, willing to forgive him, for his grace and manliness, faults that might have been named vices in one less forgivable. He had a temper, it was well known. True, but that was a manly attribute. What is a man

worth without a temper? And he had outgrown the wildness of his earlier years, for when he married he was of the mature age of one-and-thirty.

All promised fairly, and for a while the young wife knew no sorrow at the lonely cottage on the common, save in the long hours of her husband's absence, when he was at the business he loved of ferreting out the rats from the houses of the neighbouring gentry and farmers, or aiding with his pack of mongrels in all the rabbit hunts in the country. For these services he was rewarded with a handsomer wage than many a more regular walk in life would have won for him. It was work after his own heart, and James Gordon and his dogs and ferrets became a standing institution in the countryside. The ferreting of rats and rabbits is a business that cannot be pursued all the year round; but for moles there is no close season, and in the spring and summer Gordon found a means of livelihood after his heart in trapping these burrowing vermin for the farmers, whose fields they harried with unsightly mounds.

He had his "country," as they would say of a pack of fox-hounds, as clearly defined as Causey's on the other side of Bidecombe. They never thought of crossing each other's boundaries.

Such was his mode of life, and for three years

from the date of their marriage his young wife found no fault with it. It was lonesome at the cottage on the common, but her husband's ardent affection when he returned consoled her for his long absences. Then followed that which the more foreseeing might have feared for a childless woman. The novelty of the marriage state wore off; it may be that there was a suspicion of less warmth in their mutual love. For one reason or another the hours of her husband's absence began to grow very irksome to her. In the village it had all been so different. There, one had but to open the door, and there were neighbours ready for a gossip; but here, scarcely a soul passed in the twenty-four hours, and the village was half a mile or more away. Nevertheless, as the months wore on, and the wife became more conscious of the loneliness, she grew more and more into the way of traversing this long half-mile for the sake of the society that she found at the end of it. And in this there might have been no manner of harm if the hours of her husband's work had been constant and regular. But there was no constancy nor regularity about his comings and goings. He would go forth at all sorts of odd hours, when, as he said, "the ducks would be beginning to be on the move." How he knew the times of their movements he could not have explained to the

wife even had she been willing to listen to an explanation. He looked forth and there would be a haze to windward, or a sign of wind in the sky, or signs more subtle than these, which one could not put into words; and indeed James Gordon himself was emotionally and instinctively, rather than rationally, conscious of them. He *felt* that it was the time for the ducks' coming in, and that was all that he could tell one—felt it by some curious sympathy with them that he had acquired from studying their ways and sharing their weather. It was a halting explanation enough, and so the young wife felt it. Naturally she did not understand it, and—equally naturally, perhaps—she did not believe it. She believed only that he went out when the fancy seized him. Equally little did she believe in his reply when she asked him for how long he would be away, and he answered that it depended on the birds—he could not tell. He *could* tell if he chose, she believed, and his absence depended not at all upon the birds, but on his moods. Nevertheless, it was all quite true. He could not tell. And sometimes he would be out all night, "because he had expected a good flight of ducks at the dawning." He could not explain his grounds for the expectation, nor why it would sometimes seem good to him to return shortly after dusk, and at

others to sit out all the moonlit autumn night. She believed, naturally enough, that it was pure caprice that governed his movements.

And such being their uncertainty, by day no less than by night, it was natural enough, further, that she should not be able to time her own comings and goings to and from the village exactly with his. Once or twice on his home-coming he found her absent, and forbore to complain when she returned. But with his quick temper, forbearance soon came to an end. And as she was absent more frequently, while the frequency of her visits to the village increased, he chided her, on each occasion more hotly; on which, after a while, her own temper took fire, and she answered him back with words as hot as his.

"What was she to do," she asked, "during all the hours that he was away? He came in and went out as the fancy took him; why should she be less free?"

Then he began to take her to task. "Why was she not as other women, who are content to wait patiently at home in their husband's absence?"

To which she replied that other women lived in the village among their friends; and besides, she added, they had children at home to take their attention and their affection.

The reference to their childless state was unfortunate. It aroused the slumbering fury in the man. Their childlessness had been as sore a grief to him as to her, for at heart his nature was an affectionate one. He began to say quick, bitter things; hinted at suspicions, that he did not for a moment entertain, of the object of her visits to the village. She answered in like vein, "How did she know what he was doing all the hours that he pretended to spend on the common or foreshore? What guarantee had she that the wild fowl were the only objects of his attention?"

The storm of reviling grew, with answer upon answer, until James Gordon could control himself no longer. With a step he reached the gun that stood beside the chimney-piece, and seizing it by the barrel, raised it to strike her with the heavy butt. The girl came of a staunch race, and stood with cheeks blazing and eyes defiant, daring him to touch her. Even in the very act, it was said, he repented, and would have stayed the blow; but it was too late. The butt fell, not indeed on the wife's fair head on which it had been his purpose, when he raised it, that it should fall—his change of mood saved them from that final tragedy—but, with crushing force, on the girl's delicate shoulder, and bore her heavily to the floor. Then James Gordon,

fearful to trust himself with her any more, strode out, without a word, into the night, still grasping the gun in his hand.

All that night he strode on, stumbling and heedless, here and there, over the common. The plover or the curlew that he roused to fly, with plaintive note, unseen through the darkness, was never noticed nor heard. Many times he fell into the small ditches that were cut for draining the surface water; then pulled himself up, with a curse, and so on again through the night. At the dawn of day he came back, tired out and sobered—in possession of his right mind again—to the lonely cottage. He was terribly afraid of what he might find within. His mind was occupied with the vision of his wife as he had seen her, prone and helpless on the floor. He feared that he might find her dead.

Instead, he found the cottage empty. The wife had gone. There were few rooms to search. The conclusion was soon reached. All day long he sat there waiting for her, but still she did not come back. In the evening he went up to the village and inquired at her father's house if she had been seen. All declared they had not seen her. He knew by their faces that they were lying, but he was too proud to press his questions. Their faces showed him another thing—that they were

afraid of him; and when he went home to his solitary cottage, a glance at the little looking-glass told him that their fear had not been without reason. His drawn gaunt visage was like the face of a madman. He scarcely knew it for his own, and himself feared to regard it again in the glass.

From that night forward he was a changed man. His wife did not return to him. He abjured the society of his fellows, and no longer resorted to the Red Lion and other places of meeting in the village. He did but go thither very early of a morning to chuck in the birds that he had shot, receiving payment for them without a word, and so back to the lonely cottage and his silent life.

Once a rumour reached him that his wife was living with some relatives somewhere on the Coombe side, but he paid no heed to it; and when, a few months later, a message came to him, purporting to be from her, he returned no answer to the man who bore the message, and strode off in silence.

Such was the story of the man whom we used to see faring out over the common towards sunset as we came home reluctantly in obedience to the orders of Authority.

On a certain fine evening in October, nearly two years after his wife had left him, he resorted

as usual to his hiding-place among the sandhills. The *cache* was on the summit of a small hill, whence he could command a free view over the open sea and the estuary of the big river on the right hand. It was a clear peaceful evening, with a light wind from the south which came in gentle whispers through the tresses of dry bent grass that fringed his nest. The gulls had ceased their clamour on the foreshore, and were winging their way in a straggling procession over the sea towards their roosting places on the westward cliffs. The sea came rippling up nearly to the base of the sandhills. In the middle distance he saw the white breakers racing on the river's bar. Just outside the line of breakers a little boat, with a tanned sail that caught the sunset light redly, was standing in and off in a purposeless fashion. Gordon idly wondered what it might be doing there, then dismissed the speculation shortly from his mind, concluding it to be the boat of some pleasure tripper from the little hamlet of Coombe, whose white houses he could just see streaking down the cliffs to the eastward, beyond the river's estuary. The choiring larks were beginning to settle down for the night among the bents, but still, from the lower shore, came the piping of dotterel, and oyster-catchers, and curlew, and all the shrill-voiced tribes of wading birds.

Suddenly, appearing out of the blue, after their manner, came a flight of five golden plover swiftly scudding past him over the sandhill's crest. Gordon fired after them a hurried shot, and the last bird fell. It fell, out of his sight, over a little knoll of bent-fringed sand. He marked the spot, and lifted himself out of the pit to go to it, while a chorus of shrill clamour, raised by the gun's report, came from the waders on the beach. He took no heed of the piping, which was the familiar response to the sound of his gun, and was about to step down the yielding bank when, close to him—beneath, as it seemed, his very feet—came up a cry, shrill as that of the piping birds, yet altogether distinct from theirs in tone. Almost from beneath his feet the cry came, and for a moment he stood still, there, where he was, arrested, trembling with a vague fear—of what, he knew not. The cry repeated itself—was sustained, rather—and Gordon, with a short laugh, threw off the influence of his first uncanny fear, yet still trembled, with an element of curosity now mingling with the first vague terror, as he took a few steps down on the seaward side to the spot whence the cry seemed to issue; and there he saw, in a hole dug in the soft sand—a hole similar to that in which he was wont to lie hidden for the birds, though smaller—a little

child. It lay wrapt in a chequered shawl folded about a fisherman's blue jersey sizes too large for the tiny body. The little face was contorted with fear, which the child expressed by crying as if its heart were breaking.

"Poor thing, then!" said Gordon, pitifully; "did the gun frighten 'ee?"

But this conciliatory address found no favour. The babe continued to cry in the hole where it lay, and Gordon, standing helplessly regarding it, could find no better word to say than—

"Poor thing, then! Where be your mammy?"

And still the answer was the same, the plaintive, pitiable crying.

Gordon began to realize that his aspect, perhaps, was not reassuring. He laid his gun aside, in sign of friendly intentions. Then, summoning a winning smile to his dark face, bent over the little mite and said coaxingly—

"Come. Come then, dearie; don't 'ee cry then, don't 'ee."

But even this adjuration failed to charm. The babyish misery continued.

"Come then, dearie," the man pursued, resorting to further blandishment. "Come into t'other pit with me then. Come."

And heedless of the persistently expressed objections he took the little bundle up in his

strong arms and bore it very tenderly to his own pit on the top of the sandhills. There he held it to him, soothing it and crooning to it till gradually he won it to some passive acceptance of the situation, the convulsive sobs died down and gradually ceased, and finally the child closed its weary little eyes, and its soft breath came regularly. It slept.

Then, and not till then, James Gordon began to ask himself what he was doing. Further, he began to ask what was the child doing there—there in a sand-hole, like a young wheatear? Where was the parent bird? By what means had the child been brought, and wherefor had it been left? For left it undoubtedly had been. The gloaming was falling fast, and it was certain that any picnicers who might have been taking an *al fresco* tea among the sandhills would have gone home long ago. The child had been abandoned. It was very certain, too, that it had been left deliberately—not accidentally forgotten. The hole, recently dug, in which it had been placed, was evidence of this, as well as the multitude of wrappings by which it was protected from the evening dews. Moreover, a second visit to the child's nest discovered provision in the shape of a bottle of milk left in the sandpit—a bottle with the cork in, which the child could not possibly have withdrawn, even

if it had been possible that it should have the intelligence to attempt it. As well as Gordon could make the estimate, he judged the age of the child to be some two years. When he revisited the child's sandpit he left the baby asleep in the corner of his own higher nest. The light was failing every moment, but he could still see distinctly tracks of feet that had approached the sandhill from the beach. It appeared that these were the tracks of two persons, of a man and of a child or woman. The larger tracks were made by boots without nails, as he observed from an impression on the hard wet sand just above the waterline—probably, he thought, by a fisherman's boots. And the tracks were fresh. He looked doubtfully out over the sea towards the race of white waves on the bar where the boat with tanned sail could still be seen, bobbing up and down in the disturbed water.

Then he bethought him of his plover, and had no trouble in finding it as it lay dead on the white sand with a few ruddy drops welling from it and caking in the sand. He came back to his pit where the child still slept peacefully. He looked doubtfully back at his cottage, dimly visible across the flat mile or so of common. It was a rough walk home; ordinarily he did not fear it on the darkest night, but this evening his

"bag" was not ordinarily precious, for he had to carry home the child.

She did not wake, only made a little stir and murmur, then snoozled down on his shoulder more confidingly than ever as he lifted her up and placed her in the crook of his arm. A curlew passed close over their heads as he was setting forth, with a shrill pipe of alarm, to find itself so close to them, that he feared might awake the child; but she slept on peacefully, untroubled. Once on the way home, after the dusk had overtaken them, a flight of duck came quacking high over-head, and Gordon, forgetful for a moment, with the instinct born of habit, made a sudden movement with his gun. At which the little girl stirred again, so that he feared she was about to wake, and he began singing her a low lullaby which soothed her down again with such success that he continued his song in a musical rough baritone.

A company-keeping couple, who had wandered down towards the common, spread surprise among the village gossips next morning by the news that James Gordon had been heard singing on his way home to his cottage. The wonder grew on the report of Mrs. Pengelly at "the shop," that Gordon, instead of making his small purchases with his usual taciturnity, had been putting to her, that morning, some most

strange questions as to the right food for children.

"I don't know a great sight about mun, Mrs. Pengelly," he admitted, humbly. "If it'd been young ferrets or that kind 'twould be different."

Mrs. Pengelly, it needs not to say, itched to ask him what interest he had in children, but of late James Gordon had not been the sort of man of whom one readily asks questions about his affairs.

Later in the day Gordon appeared again in the village, and then Mrs. Pengelly had her heart's fill of gossip. The truth was that he had found himself unable to cope single-handed with this new inmate of his little home. He felt, very sorely, the need of feminine help; and, knowing no other way, determined to take Mrs. Pengelly into his confidence. He told her of the finding of the child on the sandhills, of his bringing her home, and of the night passed, not without some disturbance, with the child in his bed. In course of one of these disturbances he was ready to swear that, glancing towards the window, he had seen a pale face pressed against the pane; but, on rushing out, as if in a panic that some one had come to rob him of his newly-found treasure, could see no one there, and was forced to conclude that it had been a vision of his fancy. It was not till the morning that he realized the full

measure of his incapacity. It had been a sad awakening—that struggle with refractory small strings and garments and the passionately tearful child. The feminine presence was peremptorily needed in that little cottage. When a thing is needed, where else does one go in search of it but to "the shop"? Had Mrs. Pengelly the needed article?

Mrs. Pengelly was doubtful — interested enormously, and sure she could manage something temporarily, but as a permanence—well! Suggested that the child should be sent up, for her safekeeping, to the shop, a suggestion at which the James Gordon of the old *rôle* blazed up again with sudden anger. Mrs. Pengelly hurriedly withdrew the suggestion, promising to provide something temporarily, and eventually James Gordon returned to his cottage accompanied by a discreet widow of a certain age.

The day passed peacefully. The little girl, under the feminine influence, began to grow accustomed to her surroundings. Gordon said he would be thankful to the widow if she would stay with the child while he went forth at the dusk, wild-fowling, for the single plover of the previous even did not go far to meet the expenses of his household on its extended scale. After that he would not trouble her, he could manage by himself for the night.

When he arrived at the sandhills he found, to his surprise, other tracks leading from the water's edge to the *cache* in which the child had been left. The tracks were similar to the smaller ones that he had seen before, but even these new tracks were not fresh; they had been made, he thought, the previous night. Then he observed that they did not stop at the *cache*, they went on inland. And again the thought of the pale face pressed against the pane recurred to him, and he wondered.

This evening was not like the previous one. It was warm and quiet, but whereas on the former he had clearly seen to Coombe and to the cliffs beyond it, he could now scarcely make out the line of breakers on the bar. A close haze had come up in the evening with the east wind. It was a night on which the birds, if they came at all, would come low-flying and tame, but it was not a night on which they were likely to be actively on the move. Suddenly a dark object loomed out of the haze, seaward, at a distance of a few hundred yards. It grew larger and clearer, and soon he knew it for the boat with the tanned sail that he had seen the previous evening lying in and off outside the white foam on the bar. As he looked at it and wondered what it should be doing so near shore, a man stood up in the stern, and raising a telescope, took a long steady

look towards the sandhill in which was Gordon's pit. For a moment, with his quick temper, Gordon felt inclined to resent the impertinence; the next moment he caught the flutter of a woman's shawl in the bows, and it flashed upon him that now he was about to know the meaning of the child's being left where he had found it. He remained quiet in his pit while the boat, with a light wind, drove slowly in towards the shore. Nearer and nearer it came till the keel grated softly on the gently shelving beach. The man let the small sail run down, while the woman, her shoes and stockings held in her hand, and her dress kirtled high, stepped down into the shallow water and waded to the shore.

Gordon gave a great start as he saw her figure. He half turned, as if to move out of his pit and away; but some feeling stronger than his will seemed to hold him prisoner, and he stood, with his arms resting on the edge of the pit, watching the woman as she walked straight up towards him over the sand. When she was almost come to him, he bowed his head, for very shame, upon his arms, and so awaited her.

She laid a hand gently on his shoulder.

"Jem," she said, "do 'ee not mind me?"

"Mind 'ee?" he groaned. "Do 'ee think 'tis likely as I should not mind 'ee? Do 'ee think as I've forgotten 'ee?"

"Why don't 'ee look up then, Jem, and say as you'm pleased for see me? Or be 'ee pleased, sure enough?"

Could a man resist such sweet coquetry?

"Be I pleased? Oh, lass," and at length he raised his dark face from his arms to look at her. "Oh, lass, 'tis more to me than heaven and earth for see 'ee again."

"Then why did 'ee wait so long, Jem? Why didn't 'ee send no answer when I sent 'ee the message?"

"What message, then?"

"The message 'bout the baby."

"I dunno," Gordon answered stupidly. "I didn't take no notice. I thought 'twas all foolishness. Has us got a child then, sure enough?"

"Why, you did ought to know, Jem, I should think. What have 'ee a-done with her?"

"Done with un? Done wi' what?"

"Wi' the baby, Jem—the little girl? Oh, Jem," and the glad wife burst into a merry laugh. "I seed 'ee through the window pane las' night. Oh, dear sakes, but you was real mannish foolish, you was, wi' the little un."

"Well," said he, shamedly, "'tis the first time, you know, lass. But, say, be it really ourn then, sure enough?"

"Really ourn; whose else would it be then, Jem?"

"Well there, then, whoever would 'a thought it?"

"Say then, Jem, shall us go home to un?"

"Ees, fai', then, that us will."

"What's that for, then?" Gordon asked with a spasm of jealousy as she turned and waved her kerchief, before going, towards the boat.

"Only for tell Cousin Joe as he can go back, same way as he come, to Coombe. Oh, you'ld 'a laughed fine, you would, Jem, if you could 'a seen us las' evening how us laughed at 'ee finding the little un, and taking of un up and marching off with un. Oh, us had 'ee fine, us had, with uncle's old ship's spy-glass."

"You was watching of me all the while?"

"Ees, fai', us was."

"And then you followed up right over the common for see how I was getting along wi' the little un?"

"'A course I did. Did 'ee think I was going for leave the little un to 'ee afore I seed."

"Shall us go home to un now, lass, right away?"

"Ees, fai', then; let us go."

So, hand in hand, or with arm round waist, lover-like, over the common they went through the gathering darkness.

At a certain point Gordon, making a great

effort, touched his wife softly on the shoulder where the butt of the gun had fallen.

"Is it," he asked. "Tell me, lass, is it—do 'ee feel it ever at all?"

"Never at all, Jem, nor think of it neither," she answered lightly; "and, Jem," she added, whispering, "I shan't never want for go up in the village now, when you'm away, now as we has the little un."

"No, nor I won't ever be out so much neither —I promise 'ee that, lass."

That was how James Gordon's wife came home again.

CHAPTER IX

RABBITS AND SOME GREY MULLET

Now and again, when we felt extraordinarily energetic, we used to get up at a very early hour of a fine summer's morning and go forth with gun to stalk the rabbits at their morning meal. There was a peculiar quality of delight in getting up while all indoors was still a-hush, though the dawn was peeping in through the window, and the birds were choiring their morning hymn. It was fascinating to steal on tip-toe down through the sleeping house—down even to the very larder, there to cut off a hunk of bread, and perhaps a roast chicken's leg, to serve as an early breakfast. Then, shouldering gun and slinging on powder flask and shot-belt, one might go striding along the roads and meet never a soul. Authority did not look with disfavour on this pilfering from the larder, for the object of all the labour and early rising was to shoot something—rabbits, to wit—that might more than make good the pilfering, and prove

that the early-rising labourer was worthy of his breakfast.

There was no time for the rabbits like the early morning, for then they would all be out on the feed—engrossed with their feeding, not restless and watchful, as they are apt to be in the evening, when every neighbouring road was noisy with passing carts. Moreover, we were not over and above sure of our permission to shoot on the nearest and best of our hunting grounds. On some of the fields we were welcome, but our rights over others were debatably expressed by the phrase that we "didn't think old So-and-so would say anything if he did see us." And, our licence being of this rather doubtful kind, it was obviously the better part of valour to arrange matters so that "old So-and-so" should not see us, and this he was exceedingly unlikely to do at three or four o'clock in the morning. No house or farm was sufficiently near for its inmates to be aroused by the shots. A high road went along beside most of these fields—that very high road on which, in days then looked back on with the supremest contempt, we used to chase and persecute the yellow-hammers; but it was not a populous highway at any time, and in the smaller hours of the morning not a soul passed along it. So we would boldly tramp it, with

gun on shoulder, until we had left all the outskirting houses of the village in which lived Joe's friends, the village blacksmith who had made the climbing-irons, and the carpenter who had given us the wire-netting for the magpies' cage. Then we would climb the first gate off the road and steal across the grass field to the farther hedge.

Rabbits, appearing suddenly to start out of the ground, would dart from the grass and into the brambly hedge which was the boundary of a great steep furze-covert sloping down towards the common. But these we let judiciously alone. Unless we killed the quarry stone-dead he would drag his poor crippled body through the hedge into the furze-break, and we should see no more of him. (Of course we could not take our dog Viper on an expedition of this kind, where all success must be due to stealthy stalking.) We had other views than to startle every rabbit within hearing by a chance shot at one galloping full speed across us. Moreover, since it was summer-time, it was not all the rabbits, by any means that were fit for eating; and ours was essentially a pot-hunting expedition, for it was by its success or failure from that point of view that it would be estimated by Authority on our return home. Of course, it might be as great a feat of

sportsmanship to kill one rabbit going at full speed into covert as two sitting out in the grass field; but we always found Authority to be more readily impressed by tangible and edible results than by the very best of reasons for their absence. And just over the hedge that ran cross-ways up the road, we knew that, peering through the tangle of bramble and honeysuckle and wild convolvulus, we were very sure to see quite close to us, half-hidden by the long, dry windle-straws, a pair or two of long brown ears lying back confidingly on a grey-brown little head that nodded gently as its owner nibbled the soft juicy undergrass. Then we would have to pause a moment, reckoning whether this pair of ears or that belonged to a bunny of the size and age we were looking for, namely, three-parts grown. It was a hard matter to determine, but generally, before we had fully decided the point to our satisfaction, one of us would make a light rustle in the hedge, as a coat was clutched by the thorn of a bramble. This tiny noise would be the signal for each pair of ears to erect themselves timorously; heads were lifted for an apprehensive look round, and other quite unsuspected rabbits revealed themselves as they repeated this gesture. Some, in their interest, sat up on their haunches, with dropping forepaws, like a dog begging.

This was our opportunity; and if we waited longer we might lose it, for already one or two of the bunnies, not satisfied by their look around, had slipped quietly into cover. We would level at one which, after ambling two steps towards the hedge, had halted again to look beggingly towards us, and shown himself by this manœuvre to be just of the size we wanted. Meanwhile we would have marked another of likely size farther up the field, who might serve for the second barrel.

"Bang!" the begging bunny stretched himself out with a kick, white stomach upward. There was a stampede of scurrying brown forms towards the hedge, in which we quite lost sight of the intended victim of the left barrel. We would fire incontinently at one who sat at gaze a moment at the very edge of the covert. A shrill squeal answered. In a moment we had thrown ourselves into the thorny, tangled thicket that called itself a hedge, torn our way through it, rushed to where the poor wounded little bunny—in our hurry we would sometimes shoot by mistake a very little one—was dragging himself painfully under the arching cover of brambles, jumped on him, regardless of prickles, and in a very few moments had put an end to his suffering. The other which we had shot sitting, would generally be stone-dead; it would have been

difficult to fail to kill him. And we had breathing time and a sense of infinite triumph as we surveyed the beginnings of the bag.

The further early-morning exploits had a great likeness to the first. There were more fields to be walked over, where the bunnies at our approach raced for the covert of the great furze brake, more hedges to be cautiously approached and peered over, more selection of the fitting victim, and more hurried firing of the second barrel.

By the time that the bag had reached the respectable size, and the rather uncomfortable weight, of half a dozen or so of rabbits we would be above the furze-clad slope which went down to the cliffs of the jackdaws, and about at the limit of our zeal and of our hunting ground. Beyond lay the property of a friend, indeed, but a friend who often gave us a day's rabbit shooting under quite different conditions. Our poaching little consciences were tender about the rabbits of one who was so truly our benefactor. Also, we were now two good miles from home, the sun was beginning to put forth its strength upon backs already wearied with the weight of all the game, and we would turn homeward well satisfied with the morning's work. Our feet would be sopping wet with the heavy dew; for all this while they had been rending the thick,

dew-bespangled gossamers which lay over all the fields as if the spray of a waterfall had been woven into a coverlet and thrown on them. The sun came glinting off them, so that it dazzled the eye, and the calm sea of the bay was like a golden mirror under its beams. Looking back, we could see the track that our feet had made through the sheeny gossamer, and the track was marked of every rabbit that had come or gone to or fro the hedge. These mornings of summer are a revelation of beauty and freshness; but our limbs were none too fresh, and ourselves all too hot and tired, for much appreciation of beauty by the time we had reached home and put ourselves to bed again for an hour or two's sleep before breakfast.

Viper hated these early-morning expeditions. He could not understand the meaning of our stealing out of bed without bidding him jump off and accompany us; and when we ultimately left the room, after putting on our worst and oldest suits of clothes, in which Viper and we alike delighted, with unmistakable indications of an intention to go a-shooting, we had to shut the door on much canine bewailing. Poor Viper! It really was only a mixed joy to him when we returned with a bag which he had not helped in filling. These days were not Viper's days; nevertheless, like other dogs, Viper had his day

occasionally—days when our neighbour, whose rabbits we respected, gave us shooting, and bade to the shoot every dog, broken or unbroken, that would chase a rabbit. And, to say truth, the unbroken—the utterly unbroken—were in a very large majority; nor, even had one been perfect after the culture of all the schools, could he have been expected to retain his culture 'midst the evil influences of example and precept which were rife in those rabbit hunts. For the most part the covert consisted of gorse-beds lying in patches of various dimensions on the hillsides facing the sea—hillsides bare, for the most part, of all growth save a very scanty and wiry grass, but intersected, for inscrutable reasons, by a network of the great, broad, straggling arrangements in earthwork, bramble, stunted hedge-elm, and various thorny growths which go in the West to make up a "bank." Often a watercourse would be running down one side of them. From the point of view of the scientific farmer these banks must have been a terrible waste of labour in the construction, and of land—presuming the land to have a value—in their maintenance. But the rabbits delighted in them, so did Boyhood, and so did Viper.

Viper was what we called a good "hedge dog." That is to say, that if you put him into a

hedge, either by indicating to him a "run" through the tangle by which he might force himself to the top of the bank, or by the more summary method, in the absence of a "run," of throwing him into the tangle at the top, then he would continue hunting along the top of the hedge, using the "run" along the ridge made by the rabbits, and would never leave it until he had convinced himself that there was no rabbit sitting out on top of the hedge. These great overgrown banks very often had ditches on either side, and in that case it was necessary that a dog should hunt down each of these. The ideal method of procedure was that one or two dogs—for two noses are better than one—should hunt along the top of the bank, one dog along either ditch, and at least one dog altogether outside the hedge and ditch, on either side. The hunters on top would occasionally push an inquiring nose down, and the ditchers occasionally extend their researches upward, if they suspected any of the holes with which the bank would be honeycombed of concealing a rabbit. On this plan, if its practice had been as perfect as its theory, it is hard to see how a rabbit could have escaped detection. Unfortunately, it did not always "work." The dog's progress along the top of the bank could not be conducted at a regular rate: it was

spasmodic. The run made by the rabbits, and enlarged by dogs at many previous hunts, was continually choked by the undergrowth. For a few paces the dogs would go forward quickly, then stop, brought up by a tangle of hedge-growth and coarse grass. "Hie on, there, Viper!" we would cry, as the dog, crouching before the barricade, looked out through the thicket with eyes that seemed asking for encouragement. Then he would draw back a pace or two, and, bursting through the barricade with a rush, go on with a free course again. These constantly recurring stoppages allowed the ditch-dogs, who had a less impeded path, to get ahead; and often it was impossible to tell where the hedge-dogs were, so thick was the screen of foliage. Often, when Viper was working the hedge in most approved fashion, we would hear a sudden "Yap! yap!" a hundred yards or so ahead. Then there would be a general and demoralised rush of "guns" and dogs, on either side of the hedge, to the cry. We always had one gun at least on each side. The dogs outside the hedge would reach the scene of action first, where the "yap, yapping" was pushing the rabbit along through the scrub. These outside dogs would begin yapping too, rushing on ahead again to get a fair start after the rabbit when it should break covert. Then

we would try to recall them, with shouting of their names in every tone of blandishment or objurgation. Generally we had to threaten them by the gesture of throwing an imaginary stone before they would return in reluctant obedience. Often the rabbit would choose this moment to break out, and in the general disorder the first barrel was usually futile. Before we could fire a second the dogs, no longer under any semblance of restraint, would be rushing perilously into the line of fire, and as likely as not the rabbit would make a bolt of it across the field, with the whole pack in full cry after him, spite of shouts and whistles and every conceivable persuasion. Viper, long before this, would have come down from his hedge-running to join in the pursuit. Eventually the dogs would come back, one after the other, rather sheepishly, with tongues hanging out and panting sides, to receive admonitions which would be quite ineffectual when a fresh exciting occasion presented itself.

It was not always thus. Sometimes a single shot, or oftener a volley, would roll the bunny over before the faces of the racing pack. Then it was a question of saving his carcase from the excited fury of the body-snatchers, each of whom retired, after much scolding, with at least a mouthful of fluffy fur to champ upon and taste.

A more utterly demoralising school for dogs it is impossible to think of.

Or, again, it might be that the rabbit, in his confusion, would bolt back along the hedge, right into the mouths, as it seemed, of the dogs who were conscientiously hunting it. It was quite marvellous how these back-bolting rabbits escaped. Sometimes it seemed as if they ran absolutely between the dogs' legs, and yet got off unhurt. Then the cry would continue back, up the part of the hedge which we had already hunted, sometimes going at such merry speed in the depths of the hedgerow that no running could keep up with it, and the rabbit would break covert a hundred yards off, and go joyfully across the field without a shot fired at him. Now and again it happened, however, that the dogs were too many or too agile for him, and the yapping note, changing suddenly to a snarling "worry," would proclaim that he had been "chopped" in covert.

A very frequent alternative was the diving of the rabbit down one of the many holes. Generally this manœuvre was not at once detected. The dogs in the hedge would go yapping on, not noticing in their eagerness that they had overrun the scent, and those outside would accompany them, dancing up on their hind legs for a better view of the chase and the

quarry. Then the notes would die away. The dogs would begin fussing about, silently—consciously at fault. At length one would be seen scratching and digging at one of the holes, with whines in the intervals of his labour. Immediately all the others would flock to him and strive to push their noses in, before his, into the hole, receiving blinding showers of earth in the face from his shovelling paws.

"Gone to hole!" "Which hole is it, then?" "That there where the old Rover's marking."

So "the old Rover" would be drawn out, with ignominy, by the great stump of his spaniel's tail, and all the dogs would be called back, and held by the attendants to admit "old Belzy," Causey's polecat ferret. Causey always was engaged, all the neighbourhood round, for a day of this description. "Old Belzy," released from the bag in which he had, so far, enjoyed the sport, looked doubtfully around before he proceeded to explore the hole at whose mouth he had been released. The hole was brought to his notice more pointedly when he was taken up by his middle and thrust, head foremost, down it. He resented the indignity by drawing back and again standing doubtfully.

"There bean't no rabbit there," Causey would say.

"I know the rabbit be there, 'cos the old

Rover marked," the keeper, Rover's master, would answer in high dudgeon.

Belzy seemed to have heard him. He gave himself a shake, just to get himself ready for business, then dived into the hole with avidity. "Maybe he'm there after all," his master would mutter.

Presently, after a trying interval of silence, there came a hurried rumbling in the bowels of the bank. The dogs jumped in the arms of those that held them. "Look up!" Causey would say in a hoarse whisper. Then there was a final scurry, a swish through the thicket; the dogs made a more determined jump. "Ee'th bolted! Let go the dogs!"

So the dogs were loosed, and rushed, with cries of eagerness, into the hedge, while Belzy, his duties finished, was consigned again to the dark obscurity of his bag.

Belzy was the biggest ferret it has ever been our lot to see, and the best. Sometimes, when there was a suspicion that a nest of young rabbits was in the hole, or when a rabbit had been wounded so badly that it was unlikely to bolt again, Belzy was let in with a string attached to the collar round his neck; and often, when the rabbit has refused to bolt, we have known Causey tug on the string with force that one would have thought must have broken the

little beast's neck. But, far from that, it did not even have so much effect as to make him loose his hold of the rabbit, and we have seen ferret and rabbit literally dragged out together, so that one could seize the rabbit by the ears and put an end to his sufferings even while Belzy was still hanging like a bulldog to him. At other times the collar around his neck was ornamented by a bell, which tinkled cheerfully as he moved to and fro in the burrow, and told us his whereabouts. We were a little doubtful whether Belzy derived his name from this appendage to his collar—it was the derivation which we always favoured when we spoke of him to Authority—or whether, as amongst ourselves it was sometimes whispered, it was an irreverently shortened form of the name of one of high position in the councils of evil spirits. On the whole, however, Belzy was an amiable ferret, and only under severe provocation gave any grounds for the suggested diabolical origin of his name. Now and again, it is true, he would decline to come out of the hole, in spite of all seductive allurements, such as the dangling of a dead rabbit at the mouth of the burrow; but he was never known to misbehave in this way without some such excellent reason as a nest of tender young rabbits in the subterranean depths. On these occasions it became necessary for Causey, much

complaining, to remain behind, digging away with his spud at the orifice of the hole, and gradually enlarging it more and more until he had buried himself in mother-earth, and could reach down to the place of Belzy's succulent feast.

While he was thus engaged the rest would go forward with the rabbiting, and presently he would overtake us with Belzy safely restored to his bag, and himself and all pertaining to him the colour of the red earth of the country.

Surely a ferret's existence is the most perfect example of a life of disappointments! He spends the inactive part of it in a hutch, which is all well and good; but when he comes out to take the field he is carried, with none too gentle care, in a dark and dirty bag. Then he is let out, to go down into the darkness of the rabbit-hole, only, nine times out of ten, to see the provoking rabbit skip off out of the hole before he can get even a nip at him; and when he follows the bunny out into the upper air he is immediately snatched up, ungently, by his middle, and thrust back again into the bag. In truth, it is nothing short of a marvel that ferrets are even as good-tempered as they are, rather than a wonder that some of them are the sourest cynics.

All our rabbiting ground was on hillsides sloping down to the precipitous cliffs, so that

our recollections of it alternate between a throng of shouting men and yapping dogs going along either side of one of the great fences, and a rabbit with ears erect going full speed over the dry yellow grass of the upland toward the cliff, with the blue sea far below as his background. When once the rabbits had reached the cliffs they were safe from us. They knew all the runs and tracks on the sides of the precipices; but the dogs and ferrets knew them not, and we dared not allow them to risk their precious lives.

But besides the wide overgrown fences there was covert for the rabbits in the gorse-beds which sometimes darkly dotted the hillsides, and sometimes crowned them in wonderful glory with ubiquitous golden bloom. The gorse was very beautiful, but very prickly. After these rabbit-hunts we would have occupation for days in picking the prickles out of our epidermis. And if it was bad for us, certainly it was no better for the dogs. Viper was a fox-terrier, and though his coat was a little rougher than that of some, it was very poor protection against the gorse-needles. The poor little fellow's nose and eyes used to be very red and sore when the day was over; and, for all his weariness, he could scarcely rest in any position long, but must move uneasily, with whines, even in his very sleep. And when he forgot his sufferings, the excitements of the

day would still be with him, even in his deepest slumbers, so that he would "Zouf! zouf!" and twitch his limbs in hot pursuit of a dream-rabbit. His dreams were like our dreams, apparently, in that he never seemed to *arrive* in them. He was always pursuing, never capturing; his dream-hunting was like the life-hunting of Belzy.

We are not now able to aver that Viper was pure-bred, though there was a time when we would have resented most strongly an aspersion on his pedigree. Certainly, you could pick him up by his stump of a tail, and he would give no sign of pain; and this test we believed to be infallible. Wider experience has taught distrust of it. He had a breadth of forehead which seemed to us to denote intellect, but others have thought it to reveal a strain of the bulldog. His intellect, however, was not to be denied, nor was his heart; and his one ear that cocked, while the other dropped, added to his expression of intelligence and humour. His sense of humour was very keen, though too often it ran riot along the lines of practical joking, which was unworthy of him. Beneath the ear that cocked he had a black patch over the eye, and this was the only marking on his white coat. He was a very keen sportsman, and the sense of fear was utterly unknown to him.

If he had a fault, it was too great impetuosity.

Other dogs, with skins and coats no tougher than his, would suffer far less in the gorse-bushes. One, that used to hunt with us constantly, was as cunning as a serpent in avoiding the prickles. He was a warrior of the name of Turk—one-eyed, for the other had suffered in an engagement with an otter—a fox-terrier, like Viper, though of a wirier coat. The coat gave him little protection, but his cunning supplied the place of armour. Among the dogs who habitually came with us was a big, coarse spaniel with a dense coat that no thorn could pierce; and often, as we stood silent and motionless at the corner of a furze-brake (for no rabbit will venture near you unless you are both silent and motionless), we used to see Turk come, in hot pursuit, to a dense thicket of the furze. He would try one or two runs into the thicket, but find them too small for him, and draw back. He would wait a moment, knowing that the slower-going spaniel was on his track. The spaniel would come up, burst with a crash into the thickest of the brake, making a wide avenue, through which Turk would easily follow after him without a scratch. Yet Turk was brave enough, too, when occasion demanded it, as witness his damaged eye and many other honourable scars, only he knew too much of the realities of life to go to meet unnecessary trouble. His prudent head governed

his emotions. Viper was emotional first, rational afterwards.

Rabbits were not the only visitors of the great furze-brakes, though they may have been its chief regular inhabitants; but many times partridges have gone whizzing up from them, and escaped scatheless, as a rule, the shots fired after them with little regard of close seasons or game licences. There are some temptations, as Aristotle says, which are beyond the power of human nature to resist, and among these, if the human in question be a boy, may perhaps be reckoned the very occasional partridge whirring up unexpectedly out of a furze-brake. Once, and the month was August, a great cock-pheasant rose rocketing gloriously from the gorse, and as he was levelling himself for his flight to another covert, a lucky shot brought him down like the rocket's stick. Nor were we ashamed of it. As the French novelists say of love, *c'était plus fort que moi*, and deem that they have amply apologized for every shortcoming of their heroine, so it was with us, and the pheasant was picked up and borne along, with little said. Only, at the end of the furze-brake the old keeper—too old for furze-brakes, and practically too old for "keeping," had there been anything to keep—said, cocking his ears, "Hullo, what be that there?" and Causey, who was carrying the pheasant,

replied readily and unabashed, "Oh! the dogues caught 'ee in the vurze." And so they had, only an ounce of shot from a gun had made the capture easy for them. It was said that some one had once seen a woodcock get up from one of these furze-brakes, but we held a sceptical attitude towards this woodcock.

Further inland were plantations of big trees, beneath which we hunted the rabbits; there there was always a chance, too, of a shot at a passing wood-pigeon. There were squirrels, also, among these trees, which we were encouraged to shoot because of the damage they do in nibbling the sapling timber. Few people know how excellent a squirrel is to eat. "The gipsies eat them," we were told, as if this should be enough to make us decline them henceforward. But in truth it had rather the opposite effect, for what life is so alluring to the imagination of Boyhood as a gipsy's? When once, however, we had persuaded the cook to roast a squirrel for us, it looked so nice on table that we even persuaded Authority to try a slice; and even Authority, steeped as it always is in prejudice, was forced to admit that it was "not so bad." Afterwards we began to regret that we had wrung this cordial admission from Authority, for Authority became so eager for "just a little bit to taste," that it was with difficulty that

Boyhood managed to keep enough (which meant a good deal in the days of growth) for itself. We were also told that gipsies ate hedgehogs, roasting them in clay; and this was food which we always aspired to taste, though we never achieved it, for the cook declined to have anything to do with such "nasty prickly things, that eat blackbeetles," and our ambitions did not urge us strongly enough to make us light an *al fresco* fire and cook the hedgehog after the gipsies' own manner.

There was no lack of hedgehogs. We often found them in the fence of our orchard at home, and sometimes came upon them in the gloaming, taking their walks abroad after insects and slugs. But those that we found away from covert were generally young ones. We used often to bring them into the house, where they lived on the multitudes of blackbeetles which abounded in the kitchen premises, gratefully eking out existence on bread and milk. Generally they met their end by taking such a surfeit of blackbeetles as proved fatal. They used to become very tame, and some of them seemed to know us quite well.

We had one very sad day indeed on the yellow gorse-clad hills facing the sea—the day on which Viper fell over the cliff edge and right down to the rocks beneath. It was his impetuosity that brought him to it. He was an obedient dog

ordinarily; but on this occasion, in swift pursuit of a rabbit, he heeded neither command nor entreaty. The rabbit whipped over the cliff edge and was into its hole as safely as a sand-martin could have flown there; but poor old Viper went at too great a speed to stop himself, and fell lumbering over. There he lay, far below, a silent, motionless flake of white on the black rock. The cliff was not at its highest at this point, or we might have spared ourselves the vain pains of going down to look at him. There was a pathway just a little farther westward, which on such an occasion one could run down almost at full speed, and it did not take long to reach the dog. He made no attempt to move, only looked up with loving eyes as we came to him. His limbs did not seem to be broken, but he whined when we touched his side. Probably he had a broken rib or two. "Pore thing! he'll die, I know 'ee'll die!" was the form of consolation which old Causey offered. But we carried him home in an ambulance made out of a coat; and all the while he lay quite still, without a whine, only looking up, and trying to repay us with a grateful smile when we spoke cheeringly to him. When we came to the house one of us rode straight off for the "vet."

Viper lay on the straw in the stables. When the dog-doctor arrived the others were just

coming from the shooting. "Pore thing!" said Causey, looking compassionately at him. "There he be, dead! Pore thing, I know'd 'ee'd die."

But Viper was not dead, nor had any intention of dying, only this was Causey's way. Once he had said a thing would happen it must happen, according to his way of thinking, and in point of fact did happen, according to his belief. So, having said that Viper would die, the saying, in his view, was equivalent to the dog's death; and afterwards, whenever he saw Viper, who henceforward was not quite the dog he had been before—prematurely aged, and feeble in action, but all the dearer to us—he would say, "Pore thing! there 'ee be—might equal so well be dead, he might. Pore thing! I know'd 'ee'd die." Such are the consolations of the omniscient.

After this poor Viper was never able to take an active part in hunting. We would take him out, and he would sit beside us at the corner of a furze-brake, trembling with excitement, but never trying to go into the covert nor to work a hedge. It was a joy to him to be allowed to mouth a recently killed rabbit, and he could still do a little in the way of mole-catching and hedge-hog-finding. No poor human cripple ever realised more thoroughly his own disabilities. Still, he enjoyed his life, and remained the best of comrades.

Down among the rocks of the foreshore, below the cliffs over which poor Viper fell, the receding tide used to leave, among all the smaller pools, one that was considerably larger than any other. The water therein was quite out of our depth, as we have proved, and out of the depth even of a grown man. It was so much larger than the surrounding pools that it was quite well known to us by the name of the Mermaids' Pool. We never saw mermaids in it, but it often happened that as we came to it we would see large fish dash away from its surface and disappear into the forest of various seaweed that fringed its sides and depths. We paddled and we dived in the pool, but never succeeded in capturing the fish. The utmost that we ever achieved was to feel a slippery elusive shape glide out of our fingers as we thrust them into the beautiful green and pink and brown weed. Even these inquiries we prosecuted with misgivings, and were mightily cautious how we trod, for once we had brought up from the depths of this pool a spiny-backed crab, a horrid red thing like an enormous spider, with thorny spikes all over his back—by no means a pleasant thing to tread on with the bare feet. Providence had not given him very powerful nippers, deeming, no doubt, that the spiny armour was sufficient protection in itself. But besides an occasional

monster of this kind, multitudes of the common green crabs had their homes at the roots of the waving seaweeds, and each of them was able to welcome intrusive fingers with a pretty sharp nip. Lobsters were not to fear here, so far in from the low-water mark.

Boys do not think much about fairyland; but if ever it had occurred to us to form any conception of such a place, we could nowhere have found it so nearly realised as in this wonderful pool, into which the sunlight sank, to be reflected back in finely blended hues of green and azure and purple—an opalescent mystery—with the delicate waving tresses of the many-tinted seaweed sending out quivering feelers, like those of the anemones, into it. It had its darkly mysterious depths and its brightest, sunlit surfaces, and no one could say what forms of life did not hide within it. The anemones grew larger and more beautiful in form and colour here than in any other pool; and as to those fish, though we could catch but a glimpse of them as they dashed away from the surface and down into the depths at our approach, we were certain that they were something finer and altogether different from the big-headed little dog-fishes which we caught by groping for them under the stones in the lesser pools. These others we called "dog-fishes" in our parlance, but likely

enough they were quite a different species from the true dog-fish—sharks in little—with whom we made acquaintance at other times and by other means.

But, whatever the big-headed little fishes in the other pools were, we were quite sure that the fish which dived away into the recesses of the Mermaids' Pool were something quite different and much larger. We cast about for a way by which we might approach these unknown fish, so as to get a good sight of them before they had a sight of us; for we had little doubt that if we could come near enough unseen we might find them basking or playing on the surface of the pool.

Between the pool and the cliffs the rocks lay in a tolerably level field, affording no covert to speak of, but on the seaward side a ridge of higher rocks ran out like a spine into the sea. It was on one of the outjutting vertebræ of this spine that the cormorants loved to sit, and we conceived the notion of creeping out in the hope of stalking the cormorants, and coming back hidden by the backbone of rock from the fish in the pool. The cormorants flew off into the water before we came within many gunshots of them, and went diving and swimming farther and farther out to sea. It remained then to turn back cautiously and approach the pool. When

at length we peered over the tall rock down into the pool beneath we saw a strange sight. For there indeed were fish, several of them of large size and light colour, but, far from basking quietly on the surface, they were darting continuously this way and that from one corner of the pool to another, evidently seeking for some way of escape. No doubt this was the reason of their agitated movements: they had been left by the outflowing tide, and were in a panic-hurry to find a way of regaining the sea. Now and again one would remain still a moment, giving us a good look at him. We saw at once they were fish we were not familiar with.

"Have a shot at them," Bob suggested in a whisper, for I was carrying the gun.

"What's the good?" I said. "No one ever shoots fish."

"Well, it can't do any harm," he answered, quite unanswerably.

So I fired at a corner of the pool where two or three were for the moment congregated, rather than at any individual fish. There was the splash of shot in the water; chips of the rock flew back in a little gritty dust over us. Then, as the smoke cleared, we were ever so astonished to see three motionless white shapes floating in the corner into which we had fired. They were fish lying belly upwards, so

successful had the shot been. It took very little while to pull off shoes and socks, roll up trousers above the knee, and climb down on the ledges of the pool's side to seize two of the silvery fish. But when I reached out a hand to grasp the third, he gave a wriggle as my fingers touched him, and in a moment had vanished, like a passing streak of light, into the obscurities of the pool's depths.

But we had two fish in hand, which was infinitely more than we had reason to expect, and we set to admiring the soft pearliness of their backs and the silvery whiteness of their under-parts. The bigger was not much less than a pound, and the smaller only a little lighter. Curiously enough, we could find no shot-holes, and have often wondered whether these fish, which turned out to be grey mullet, had been really struck by the shot at all. One is rather inclined to think that they must have been merely stunned by the shock of the report and of the shot striking the water close above them, and that they would soon have recovered, had we left them, and dived off as blithely as the third.

This was the only occasion on which we had any success in fish-shooting. We often visited the pool again, approaching it in like stealthy manner ; but either there were no fish there, or

they had perceived us approach, so that the Mermaids' Pool gave us no further sport. After all, it was a good three miles from home, and that was a long way to go on the bare chance of a shot at a mullet.

CHAPTER X

SOME FOXES AND EIGHTY-TWO RATS

Our first lessons in riding were taken on (and off) the back of a donkey. He was a creature of changeable but, on the whole, amiable disposition. When his temper gave way before the trials to which we subjected it, we took many lessons in that gentle art of falling off which is so useful a supplement to the science of riding as more generally understood. We can make this avowal without any sense of shame now, for it happened once, on a day for ever memorable, that our donkey kicked off our riding-master himself in all his glory of boots and breeches. Joe, the coachman's boy, declared all our theory of donkey-riding to be incorrect: and it is significant that, though the donkey could kick off the riding-master, boots and breeches and all, it entirely failed to shake Joe from his seat by any of its antics. But then Joe's method was entirely different from that of the riding-master's; it was, indeed, so simple as scarcely to deserve

the name of method, being contained in the single precept that you should sit as near the tail of the animal as possible. That was the sum total of his theory of donkey-riding, and it worked to perfection in practice. My uncle, who was in the Navy, explained the mechanics of Joe's style of riding nautically: "It's as plain as a pike-staff," said he, "that when you've got all the weight in the stern, the craft isn't likely to go down by the head." It was at all events true as a statement of fact, however it may have been as an explanation of the principles, that the donkey did not "go down by the head" so frequently when Joe was riding him as when we were mounted "amidships." And this going down by the head always had the same result; we went off over the head.

For a long while we were not allowed to ride with stirrups, and whether or no this was a wise provision is hard to say. It has its advantages and its disadvantages. But it is very certain that Authority was justified of its wisdom in making us ride often without bridle. The mouth of our donkey was as the nether millstone, and had we been allowed to drag on it at will our hands would inevitably have been ruined irretrievably. As it was, we learned to gallop along secure of our seat, so long as "the craft did not go down by the head," while we guided the

donkey by means of a stick more or less ungently applied to one side or other of his head and neck. The first principle of good riding, we were taught, was that the seat was to be kept by the hips, knees, and balance only.

I learned the value of these precepts, which seemed at the time so much vanity and vexation, when I was promoted to the high distinction of riding a pony. Jumping Jenny was the inspiriting name of this creature, and the good little lady in no way belied her designation. She was Exmoor bred, and an ideal boy's pony for a heavy banked country. Timber or water she could jump at need; but her two special points were the nimbleness with which she could climb up and down a great Devonshire bank, and her unfailing eye for a bog. She had not been brought up on Exmoor for nothing. She knew the look of a bog far better than we knew it, and a team of elephants would scarcely have pulled her into it; certainly no boy would ever induce her to put foot into one.

She was as generous also as she was prudent. Though no consideration would make her set hoof on a real undoubted bog, she yet would face mere boggy ground in the most gallant fashion. Only once did she ever refuse a fence, and I carry in my mind still the time and place of that refusal and the overwhelming shock of

astonishment it caused me. We had sent on our horses on the previous day, for the meet was some twenty miles from home. I was driven out in the morning in a dogcart by Authority, who was to ride a new horse that day, fresh to the country. The first covert drawn was a big furze brake, a sure find for foxes and woodcock, of which delectable birds we counted no less than fifteen come out at the corner where we stood awaiting the first whimper. From this covert there were several lines that the fox might take, all comparatively good except one. If he took that line we should find it, we had been told, very boggy, but the odds were some five to one against it. Nevertheless that, and none of the other four, was the line that perverse fox elected to take; and we found it, as we had been told, very boggy. Authority had the best of us all, for his horse, new to the big banks, refused the very first of them, and half a precious hour was passed in getting him over it; it was, by the way, one of our most stringent rules that if an animal once refused a fence he was to be put at it till he was over somehow, or till darkness closed the contest. In the intervals of his arguments with the new horse, Authority took a glimpse at Boyhood and Jumping Jenny growing constantly more distant over a succession of banks, and noticed, as I was told afterwards, an

undue elevation in the heels of Jenny after each ascent. In truth these banks were just a little higher than those to which we and Jenny were commonly accustomed, and upset me a little in consequence. We pecked severely over several, but the ground was soft (a deal too soft!) and we were always up and on again, Jenny with a nose growing rapidly dirtier. Off the fifth bank the landing was terrible; Jenny was in up to the hocks, and the soft mud sucked lovingly as she drew each leg out of it. Some of the field were making play on firmer ground to the right. On the left was a big grey mare jammed tight in a ditch, while her late rider lay on his back in the soft bed of an indisputable bog. Poor Jenny was herself scarcely better than a fixture now, but there was no going back. The hounds were in front, and Devonshire fields are small. Together we struggled on, Boyhood sometimes afoot, sometimes for a pace or two, in the saddle; Jenny was a mass of mud right up to the girths, and Boyhood equally muddy to an equal height. Still we plunged away until at length we floundered on to more solid ground close by the further bank of the field. There was now breathing-space to count up the losses. These consisted of a broken curb-chain, the result of a particularly severe peck on Jenny's part, and a lost stirrup-leather. The latter loss was serious;

but it was hopeless to attempt any search for them in that hardly-passed Slough of Despond; I was only too thankful to be out of it at such slight cost. Then I put Jenny at the low bank, beyond which was a beautifully hard high-road; anything hard looked beautiful after our late experience. To my utter amazement she would not even offer to rise to it, but just stood stock still when she came to it. Three several times I put her at it, with spur and whip and adjuration, before I arrived at an understanding of this most extraordinary thing; and then I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself. Of course, poor Jenny was so done by her efforts in dragging herself through that dreadful slough that she was literally incapable of rising to the fence, and I had beaten her and spurred her on that account! When I realised the position, I went near to shedding tears, of shame for myself and sorrow for Jenny; but in five minutes she had recovered her wind, and went over that bank like a cat.

The hounds were by this time goodness knew where; and, with the exception of goodness, the only being who knew anything at all about their doings during a great part of that run was Authority who, after succeeding in getting his horse over the bank, jumped him backwards and forwards several times before thinking about the hounds at all, and then began to look about

him from the vantage post of the high-road. The road here runs along the watershed, giving a view into the lower ground on either side; and on his right he saw the hounds running hard with no one within some fields of them, and at intervals over the country a horse and rider fighting for life in a bog. He trotted along the high-road, watching the hunting hounds, and eventually, putting himself under the guidance of one of the road-riding brigade, cut off the pack, which by that time the huntsman had overtaken, by a cross lane.

Meanwhile Boyhood and Jumping Jenny, coming out on the high-road, met another very sorry fox-hunter, whose experiences had been similar, riding along it. Together we jogged in what we thought the most likely direction, and by good luck soon fell in with the hounds and the field, the former having lost their fox and the latter being in an advanced stage of demoralization. It seemed unlikely that more would be done that day, so we set off for a long ride home with Authority. Boyhood, after a twenty-two mile ride with only one stirrup on a dead-tired pony, was glad enough when the white bars of the turnpike gates (for there were pikes in those days) appeared through the gathering dusk to announce that it was nearly at home again.

This was on the whole a somewhat dismal experience; but for a while at all events I had a greater delight in that hunting than in any other experience that life has ever held for me. It was, of course, the poorest kind of fun imaginable from the Meltonian's point of view; but it required nevertheless a certain amount of riding, and a certain degree of nerve in galloping up and down some very queer places. It was a country in which it was impossible to take your own line, being so intersected with what were locally called "bottoms," steep glens with a stream running through them, that it was almost necessary to follow the guidance of some one familiar with it. One of the most remarkable features about it all was the way in which great heavy fellows would follow the hounds on little Exmoor ponies no bigger than my Jenny. When they came to a bank they would jump off, send their pony over with a smack on the quarters, clamber up after, often by the aid of the pony's tail, then mount again, for the ponies would wait for them on the other side, and so on. This was a style of hunting which gave you fine opportunities of seeing the hounds at their work, though it is to be confessed that this was a very minor consideration to Boyhood, who loved first and foremost the death of the fox, and secondly, plenty of jumping. It was not within Boyhood's

philosophy that there could be any pleasure in galloping over enormous grass fields; he liked much better the Devonshire plan where the fields were small and the fences plentiful. Now and again we did get a mighty gallop over great unfenced spaces, but then there was a compensating quality of delight that made up to one for the loss of the jumping. Then one raced away over the moorland towards the blue sea, with the sniff of the salt breeze all the time in his nostrils. They were always stout foxes, too, those that we found on the borders of the moorland and that took us straight away towards their well-known hold in the great seaward cliffs. There was one of these old fellows that we all knew as well as a kelt knew a Jock Scott. We knew him by his brush, of a curious dusty grey, and probably he knew us and all the field and the hounds no less well. We found him always in the same covert; he stole out of it always at the same corner, gave just the same defiant wave of his brush as he settled into his stride, and went the same line, fence for fence and gap for gap, every year. After a mile or so we came upon the open downs, golden with gorse-bushes in perpetual flower; but the old fox cared not a whit for the covert of the gorse-bushes, always holding on his line until he came to the cliff, where a hound or two generally fell

a sacrifice on the beach below, unless the pack could be whipped off in time. At length, one year when I was beginning to be quite a big boy, the old fox, sensibly greyer and dustier in the brush than last year, was viewed a mile and a half from his point and pulled down in the open within half a mile of it. His brush was one of my proudest trophies; no interfering Diana happened to be in at the death that day to rob Boyhood of its best-deserved spoils; for though we had several other brushes and a mask or two, none had been the adornment of quite so gallant and famous a fox as this one.

No doubt there were black letter as well as the red letter days. It happened to me once and again to be pounded; to come across a post and rails, though such obstacles were rare in our country, which Jumping Jenny, with the best heart in the world, could not negotiate. Then we had to go sadly round by a gap or a gateway, and by the time we had our heads straight again the hounds might be clean gone from sight and hearing. But this happened seldom, for Devonshire is the special happy hunting-ground of a boy on a small pony. Rider and steed of this quality are there equal to any others, and often it was a positive advantage to be able to creep through a small place in a hedge or bottom. We had hunted several times before it ever

happened to us to come face to face with an obstacle in the nature of timber, and on this first occasion Jumping Jenny was more equal to the situation than her rider. Jenny landed deftly enough over the fence; but Boyhood found itself strangely dislodged from the saddle and perched on Jenny's neck in a manner at once undignified and uncomfortable. A hasty scramble back into the saddle was followed by a quick glance round to see whether the unfortunate adventure had been observed. A sardonic smile on the face of Authority was the only comment; but it was comment sufficient to make Boyhood swear in his heart that before next taking the field it would be as a finished timber-jumper. In pursuance of this resolve I asked that a line of hurdles should be set up for practice on the lawn before the house. But here Authority's acquiescence was qualified by a stringent condition: the hurdles might be put up and I might practise over them at will; but it was to be clearly understood that if Jenny refused them, as might happen in cold blood, I was to keep on putting her at those hurdles so long as the daylight lasted. I agreed, perforce, to this condition, and started, with some qualms, on the emprise. Boyhood was a trifle more cunning than Authority had expected. Authority, with the sardonic smile on his face, watched

Boyhood riding down from the stables in the expectation that Jumping Jenny would be called on, then and there, to show that her title was merited. I was not quite so green as that. My favourite reading, in this phase of my career, was the glorious and immortal history of Mr. John Jorrocks, M.F.H. My hero of romance was Mr. James Pigg, and my very phrases were borrowed from this inspired book. Each fox I viewed was "the biggest fox whatever was seen"; my verdict on each night, as I looked out upon it from the window, was "hellish dark and smells of cheese." From so sapient a work it is impossible but that I should have picked up a certain share of cunning in matters pertaining to the horse, the hound, and the chase. Therefore, instead of bringing Jenny right down on the line of hurdles at the outgoing, I took her a little round about the lawn and into the next field first; and then, bringing her back towards the hurdles, with her head towards the stables, set her going at them in a canter, and over she hopped like a bird. Boyhood was disconcerted: the seat in the saddle was insecure for a moment, no doubt; but it had been drilled to sit well back, and after two or three trials I enjoyed going over a hurdle a great deal better than sitting in an armchair. After this no fence that I met in the hunting-field could puzzle me

except, of course, those that beat Jenny by their quantity rather than quality.

The quaintest incident that memory retains of those hunting days was the finish of a pottering run in a heavily wooded country where no fox would face the open. We had hunted him up and down the rides for the greater part of a day, and finally, with the scent at its hottest, we seemed to have lost the fox in the neighbourhood of a little cottage, with a pigstye tacked on to it. The hounds were giving tongue round the pigstye, while its occupants protested with no less noise. The hubbub was tremendous, and the tumult increased tenfold when the second whip climbed the stye palings and began to search the tenement for the missing fox. There was no sign of him. Still the hounds kept giving tongue around the dwelling as if the fox were there. The whip, after drawing the pigstye blank, knocked at the cottage door and, receiving no answer, entered. The sole inmate was a bedridden old woman who protested with vehemence equal to the pigs' against this invasion of her privacy; adding that no fox could possibly have come in, for the door had not been opened since her grandson had gone out to work in the morning. The man in pink was about to retire with apologies, when a bold hound burst in through the door, with a terrible burst of

melody. He stopped to ask no questions of the poor old lady, but went under the bed like a tiger. More hounds dashed in; there was a scuffle and a worry under the bed, shrieks from the poor old woman that lay on it, furious death-notes of the hounds—and in a second or two all was over. It took a deal of silver and consolation to make the lady realise that the hounds had not killed her as well as the fox. She still protested solemnly that the fox could not have entered the cottage because the door had been shut all the time; but it was obvious enough, from the sootiness of the old fellow's coat, that his way in had been, not through the the door, but down the chimney. The old lady suffered no harm; indeed, the shock and the hubbub did her a world of good. Her grandson reported afterwards that he had never known her so well and lively for years as she was for a few days after this excitement.

Another day comes back to me, the brightest of all the triumphs shared by Jenny and Boyhood. We were waiting, while hounds were drawing a big covert, on the far side from that where most of the field were watching. There was a fox at home, for the hounds threw their tongues bravely and continuously, and yet, while the greater volume of sound grew distant, it seemed that nearer at hand an echo of it still

sounded in the covert. Therefore we stayed, while every nerve of Jenny's little body quivered in her excitement. Nearer and nearer came this lesser chorus until, almost beneath our noses, a fine red fox slunk stealthily out and away over the stubble before us. I waited, as I had been well warned to do, until he was a hundred yards out in the open, before crying *tally-ho* with all the force of my young lungs. At the same moment there burst from the covert two hounds, no more, hot on the scent. Larger experience might have taught me that these could be but two stragglers from the pack, that the rest were away out on the far side of the covert after another fox: larger experience might have taught me that my duty was to whip off these two errant ones and send them back to the body of the pack; but Boyhood does not always know, or heed, its duty, and if Jenny knew better, she told me nothing. Such a run we had! Across that stubble, out over the grass field beyond, and on to a plough, only ourselves, Jenny and I, and those two hounds—and there they viewed the fox. They raced, and the fox, being fresh, raced too. How long he might have kept away from them one cannot say, for at the far end of that plough a stark obstacle confronted him. In that country they build the walls of their fruit-gardens of a clayish concrete, with a straw

thatch on top to keep the rain out. Fruit-trees grow better on these than on any other walls, and it was one of these that our fox had before him across the plough. He went at it bravely, but the take-off was none too good. Still he clung a moment, with teeth and pads, on the thatching; then the treacherous straw gave way, and he slid scrambling down the wall. Again he went at it, but in a hurried, hustled fashion, for now the two hounds were hard on him. Again he clung a moment to the thatch, then down again he slid almost into the hounds' mouths. There was a snarl, a worry, and all was over. Boyhood, alone, with a single couple of hounds had killed a fox. With enormous labour, and much rating of hounds, we managed to perform the obsequies with a pocket-knife, and trotted off in fine feather with the trophies, after the two hounds had munched the carcase. The errant couple followed, sterns proudly erect, and when, later in the day, I succeeded in falling in with the rest of the field, neither the Master nor other Authority had the heart to say a word to spoil Boyhood's sense of triumph.

It was by the happiest of happy chances that I came in at the end of one of these hunting days for the following story, though for the moment I did not know my luck. From a meet at Coombe End Gate on Galsworthy Moor we had run a

very boggy line, then lost the fox, and at dusk I found myself with two shoes gone, fifteen miles from home, close by the West Country Inn and a blacksmith's shop. That was a bit of luck in itself, if I could have realised it. So I gave my horse to the blacksmith to be shod, and while he was about it went into the bar parlour. There were several there that I knew: among others our old friend Tom Causey.

He was drinking beer at frequent intervals from a great quart pot, when I came into the inn, and sucking more frequently still from a black clay pipe which seemed to want a lot of drawing and bubbled like a bird piping as he sucked at it, but in all the intervals he was nodding in a doze, for he was well tired. He had followed the hunt afoot, and though he knew every inch of the country and the short cuts and gaps, and where the fox would be heading for and so forth, still it had been heavy going, and Causey was a big, heavy man. He was more than half asleep, or else would have been taking part in the talk which was going forward, for it was all about his special subject —rats. I expect it was just his coming which had given it this turn—of course, after the fox, the hounds, the horses and the rest had been talked over. The question had turned on the greatest number of rats ever known to be killed

by any dog at any one particular time, and there was a good deal of big talking and telling of stories which no one liked to call untrue because he meant to tell a bigger as soon as that one was finished, and had no desire to create a cold atmosphere of incredulity. I have sometimes thought that Causey had heard more of the talk than he had pretended to, the physical atmosphere being thick, steamy and somnolent with damp clothes drying and hot men cooling, for as soon as ever some one appealed to him directly as to what he knew about rats and dogs and the relation of one to the other, he seemed alive to the situation in a moment, and set out without a stop, as if he meant to make all the rest of the tales that had been told feel weak and faint and ashamed of themselves.

"Be it rats then, as you'm a-tellin' about?" he asked, and crammed his great greasy wide-awake hat on his head, which had been bare, as if he was preparing for instant action. "I'll tell 'ee then. The mostest number as ever I did know vor wan dogue vor swallee down at wan time was eighty-teu."

It must never be forgotten that Tom Causey was a genius. If it ever had been doubted it would have been assured by the way he mentioned this fairly large figure with all the air of a man apologising that he could say no

more. Still, the effect in the bar parlour was to produce what the papers call "sensation."

Ezekiel Leach, the earth-stopper, passed his hand over his brow as if he doubted whether his intellect were clouded or he had heard aright.

"'Eow many was it as yeu zaid, Tom?" he asked.

Causey went to the bottom of the quart pot before he answered, and then he said, as he drew the back of his hand across his mouth, "Eighty-teu. 'Twas zo near as makes no matter as 'e 'adn't a-swalleed up the eighty-third, but there! eighty-teu it was. Yeu know as I wouldn't tell 'ee a lie."

"Ees fai', Tom, us knows that zure enough," the earth-stopper said, terribly solemn on the side of his face towards Causey, but winking like a gargoyle on the side of which the general company had the benefit.

"What kind of dogue was 'e then, Tom?" asked another.

"Ees, do 'ee tell up about it, Tom," one or two more chorused.

So then Causey, proud in knowing he was a born narrator, though modest like all great men, obliged the company.

"Well then, if you'm minded vor hear, I'll tell 'ee just 'ow it was. 'Twas wan day as I was

a-comin' down Raleigh 'ill: they was pullin adown of a rick, just beside the road, and there was a gen'l'man standin' by wi' a pleesure dogue. And just as I was comin' along, a rat nipped out of the rick and nipped across the road. Well, the dogue snip 'ee up. Two or dree minutes more, out there nipped another, and the dogue snip 'ee up; and 'e'd 'ardly swallowed of 'un down 'vore out there nips a third, and the dogue snip 'ee up. And zo they went on, the rats nippyin' out and the dogue snippyin' of 'em up, till 'e'd swalleed up eighty-teu; and just as 'e was a-goin' vor swallee up the eighty-third" (here Causey paused, as if overcome with a hiccough or other temporary impediment in his speech, but I think it was really to fulfil the narrator's born instinct to keep his audience in suspense for the real thrill of the tale), "just as he was a-goin' vor swallee up the eighty-third, zomethin' took 'ee zick, and 'ee drawed up all the eighty-teu rats and they all rinned back into the rick."

He finished off the *dénouement* with a rattle, after the pause, and there was dead silence for a while in the steamy parlour of the West Country Inn.

Then Ezekiel Leach said gently, "Did 'ee ever 'ear tell the name of the gen'l'man wi' the pleesure dogue, Tom?"

"I don't mind, Zekel, as ever I did," Causey said, glaring hard at him.

"I think as I should 'ave been minded vor enquire," the earth-stopper persisted in mild defiance of the glare.

But that was the limit which that good company reached in the way of hinting at a doubt of the tale, for Causey was a very burly man and not always gentle. At all events, he had given me something to think about, to help pass the time as I rode back fifteen miles in the dark, on the tired horse, and twice the horse was startled, as he was just going off into a doze, by finding me lean forward on his neck, not able to hold myself upright in the saddle for laughter.

CHAPTER XI

LUNDY ISLAND

I REMEMBER well how we used to revel in the most glorious bathes off that ridge of pebbles which protected our foreshore from the Atlantic rollers. We chose the evenings, as a rule, for our bathing, because by that time we were well tired out, whether with cricketing or birds-nesting, and a cool bath in the brine was the best possible refreshment. Moreover the seaward outlook at that hour was the most delightful, with the sun sinking low over Lundy Island in the distance and sending to us a golden pathway of his reflected light across the waves. We loved best of all to bathe at the highest of the tide, for then the breakers rolled right up to the ridge of pebbles. One could almost dive off and be in deep water at once; whereas at other times one had to run out over many hundred yards, it might be, of level golden sand, and wade out a hundred or two more before one could trust oneself to swim without risk of rasping some

valuable epidermis upon the shingle. It was jolly diving to meet the incoming wave, and letting the breaking foam dash over you as you swam beneath it, to emerge triumphantly beyond it and swim on to meet the next. But there was no peaceful pleasure until one had gone out beyond the furthest breaking line and met the waves, which nearer shore curled over like the white manes of horses, while they were yet nothing more than the placid swell of ocean.

Authority had warned us of fearful ground-currents, apt to suck the young swimmer seaward, but we never encountered these currents in any strength ; and indeed on the days when the billows came in with any furious force it was work enough to fight one's way out and stand up at all against half a dozen of their assaults : one had no breath or energy left for swimming out beyond their lines. On these days, too, the sea beyond would be flecked, as far as the eye could see, into white horses, each of which would catch the swimmer an uncomfortable buffet on the head, filling his eyes, his ears, and maybe his mouth too, if he attempted an untimely breath, with salt foam.

The quiet days were the most delightful, when the sun, as it sank, gilded only the top of each successive swell with its glory, so that what had a while before the likeness of a golden

pathway, seemed now no more than a ladder of golden rungs which we contemplated reverently with pious memories of Jacob's dream. The delight and marvel of this pathway and this ladder was that, no matter where we swam, it seemed ever to reach down straight towards us, as if designed for us alone. It was a sad disillusion when some one explained the matter to us as a simple example of the laws of reflection.

But that same sea which would sometimes be so tempting and comparatively peaceful, in time of storm could be furiously and cruelly grand. At those times the roaring of the great pebbles that it ground and churned and dashed against each other was deafening. It could be heard with ease in the neighbouring country town three miles away, for the sea beat on our coast with all the fury of the open Atlantic. Now and again an unfortunate vessel would be driven ashore and broken up in a wonderfully short space on that stony ridge. But this, which to us boys was rather a pleasing excitement than an occasion of grief, happened seldom, for the sailors knew and dreaded the coast. The usual issue of a severe storm was that when it was over we would find great stems of monkey-tail seaweed, as we called it, on the shore, together with numbers of dead birds, white below and dark above, which we termed little auks. Really they

were nothing of such rarity, but merely razor-bills—*mers* as the sailors of the coast called them —which had been driven in by the waves and winds and either dashed to death on the shore or drowned in the tumult of broken waters.

Numbers of them, innumerable multitudes, nested, as we knew, on the cliffs of that Lundy Island which we could see, except when the distance was hazy, out in the Bristol Channel. We knew it, for more than once it had been our good fortune to be taken there in a trawling fisher-smack owned by a great friend of ours in the port which lay a mile or so up the tidal river. For a port there was, though the coast was so dreaded by the sailors; but it was a port that was only accessible at nearly high tide, for the mouth of the river was blocked by a sandbar over which vessels even of very small draught could pass only when the tide was fairly full.

These expeditions were a great joy to us, and yet there was a measure of disappointment about the first part of the voyage. True, there was always a certain excitement in watching the ship thread her way among the other coasters and smacks that would be taking advantage of the same tide to help them out, passing some, being overhauled by others, for which the skipper always had some plausible excuse at hand. It was interesting, too, to see the features of the

coast unfolding themselves successively as we stood farther and farther away from the land; features that were perfectly familiar, but which now acquired the interest of novelty from appearing at a different point of view. They all looked so small from the sea; but then we reflected how small a ship looked from the shore, and yet how large it really was; one could almost stand upright, being a boy, in the cabin. But that which disappointed us in the earlier miles of the voyage was the absence of any considerable amount of bird-life. An occasional wandering seagull came and looked at us, then passed on, finding us uninteresting. An occasional flight of shearwaters scudded past us over the waves and into their troughs; but there was nothing to give us any continuous interest. We always wanted the fishing-lines to be put out overboard, just on chance; and we would not believe it when told that there was no chance, that we were sailing too fast. Where there was sea there must be fish, and where there were fish, if you put out a hook with a bait there was a chance of catching them; that was our young argument, and it was as sound as many others that are applied to fishing, which is perhaps saying little enough for its wisdom. But after the island of Lundy had begun to look relatively near at hand, and the mainland dim and distant, instead of conversely,

that is to say, when we were more than half way across, then the sea began to be dotted with birds swimming in pairs, a big bird and a little one together, a mother razor-bill and its baby. They would not fly up at our approach, but contented themselves with diving as the smack came near them, to rise again at a great distance on one side or the other. As we neared the island these pairs became more frequent. Among them appeared a few guillemots, and after a while an immense number of puffins, those quaint creatures that the natives of those parts called distinctively Lundy parrots. Overhead the gannets would be winging their way with powerful strokes of their great wings, poising themselves, now and again, before diving down at tremendous speed into the water, dropping with closed wings into its surface like a dead weight, and sending up a fountain of spray such as comes from a blowing whale. After a moment or two they would rise again, with a fish in their bills, and soar up into the air as they swallowed the prey to be ready for another deadly swoop on a fresh victim.

The sight of the razor-bills, with their little ones on the water, would fill us with terrible anxiety lest all the sea-birds should have left their nests; for the high summer-tide, when the weather was most to be relied on, was the time

that Authority smiled on (though even then rather grudgingly) for these expeditions. Our friend, the skipper, however, assured us that the wild fowl were later in their date of nesting than the small birds with which we were familiar; and that though some of the mers, with their young ones, were already afloat, we should find plenty more on the cliffs of the island.

He might well say plenty. The smack came to anchor about a hundred yards from the beach on the eastern side, and we went ashore in the dinghy, landing on a very slippery little jetty of big stones, and scrambling over them to the more secure land. Then followed a winding ascent, past the proprietor's house, to the upper level of the island; for all the island had steep cliffs, least steep of all at the point of our ascent and landing; but, once these precipices were scaled, the top was a fairly level plateau some three miles in length and a mile or so across. It was inhabited only by the people of the light-house, and by the family and dependents of the owner. It was seldom that we saw a soul, after we had once passed up the combe in which were the farmhouses and the store, or any sign of cultivation, or of domestic animals save a few sheep. But rabbits abounded, darting up out of every little bush and tussock and making for their holes in the cliff-sides. And

everywhere, and ever louder as we went along to the north of the island, the air was full of a continuous, unceasing sound of the cries of the sea-birds. Where we had landed there had been few of them. We had, by that time, passed the ranks of the swimming razor-bills, guillemots, and puffins: the gannets could not dive with safety in the shallow water; and the only signs of bird-life were a few gulls hovering around us.

And yet, to our anxious enquiries after the birds, the skipper had told us there would be plenty. It was impossible to doubt him, as we heard the perpetual chorus, and yet we saw little except a plover or two flinging himself about over our heads, as we went along, and uttering his plaintive wild cry. The island was very unsympathetic to us, for, save in the sheltered combe where a stout elder bush flourished, there was nothing in the nature of a tree on the whole area; and the bare plateau did not appeal to our boyish need for secrecy and concealment.

Yet we kept on. And now, looking out beyond the northward limit of the island, we became aware of what appeared like a brown cloud, obscuring the bright levels of the sea. As we approached, it appeared that this cloud was composed of minute moving particles; and,

drawing nearer still, it was seen that what had looked like a cloud was in reality a marvellously dense throng of sea-birds coming and going from their nests in the cliff-side to the sea and back again. The brownish aspect of the cloud had been given by the dark colouring of their upper parts, which alone were visible from above. But among and through them the great white gannets went sailing and swooping majestically, throwing a fresh note of colour into the mass here and there. It was marvellous when we came near enough to be able to take in the details of the scene, that the birds could pass each other without collision, swiftly as they flew in such countless numbers. Yet if that were marvellous, how much more wonderful was it to see a bird shoot up and perch on a ledge of rock which appeared to us, looking from above, already so densely crowded, that there could not be room for a man to put his finger into the midst without edging one of the outside sitters off the ledge into the sea. And this, indeed, over and over again happened; for though the poet of our childhood had taught us that "birds in their little nests agree" it scarcely appeared as if his studies in ornithology could have extended to this remote island, so strangely did its inhabitants contradict his pleasant statement by the manner in which they

fought and hustled for their footing on these ledges and terraces of rock.

Of a truth there were, as the skipper had said, plenty. From every rabbit-hole that seemed within feasible reach of our climbing the puffins were coming and going, and for their eggs we reached down the longest arm we could stretch, yet not without trembling and much clamour at the mouth of the hole, to scare the mother-bird away, for we had a profound respect for that most useful weapon of offence the beak of the Lundy parrot. And, after all, our quest of the sea-birds' eggs came to very little, for there were, no doubt, on the island boys, quite as keen bird-nesters as we and much better climbers, to whom the eggs were of value as articles of diet. All the nests within reach had probably been already harried, and the vast majority were on the precipitous cliffs, inaccessible to any creature that had not wings, or, failing them, a rope by which he might be lowered from above.

But if we did little in the way of adding to our collection of eggs, it was a sufficing joy to lie there on our stomachs, with heads over the edge of the cliffs, and look down on this mazy throng of winged things coming and going or sitting very straight up, as is their manner, on the terraces. And among the throng of sea-

birds we saw, sailing out proudly from the cliffs, creatures that we had never seen before, peregrine falcons to wit, for Lundy is a favourite and unfailing source for the supply of these birds to falconers all over the kingdom.

The while that we lay and watched, the chorus of shrill voices was about us, deafening with its clamour and unceasing; increasing only to louder energy when we sent down a stone to clatter among the densely packed terraces and startle out a yet thicker cloud of bird-life. It was a wonderful sight, and we would make our way back to the landing-place feeling that, though we returned practically empty-handed, we had not lived in vain.

In the neighbourhood of the landing-place we found means of making up for our scant success in nest-hunting, for there would be boys of the island, informed no doubt by our friend the skipper of our tastes, with eggs to sell us of all the birds that nested on the island; and, though our finances were at perpetual low ebb, a shilling, by judicious bargaining, would go a very long way in purchasing quite as many specimens as we were at all likely to be able to carry home unbroken.

A very interesting question had to be asked as soon as we reached the smack, were we likely to get home on the next tide, or should we have

to be out all night? There was no doubt about the answer we desired. The cabin was dark and foul and very musty; there was nothing of which it did not smell. The deck, on the other hand, was well enough, on a fine night, save for one circumstance, that one of the several jobs for which the smack had come to Lundy Island was to carry back a cargo of the crabs and lobsters whose fishery is a standing industry of the place. These creatures were all alive, under no particular control, and roamed the deck irritably, seeking whom they might devour. Nevertheless it needs not to say that this diversity of discomfort was infinitely more attractive to our fancy than the cleanliness and snugness of our inglorious beds. But whether we were destined to enjoy a night of this charming nature on the open sea depended on a complexity of circumstances. For one thing, it depended much on the length of time we had taken on the passage over, as well as on the probable duration of the return journey; that is to say, it depended on the caprice of the wind. And next it depended on the hour at which the return mail was ready, for it was primarily as a carrier of mails and provisions that the smack paid its fortnightly visits to the island. The island might, indeed, be provisioned for longer than a fortnight at a time, but once in two weeks did

not seem excessive for receiving news of the outer world. Finally there was a circumstance which no doubt had some weight, but which was not communicated to us, and that was the estimate formed by the skipper of his chances of a good catch with his trawl. In theory his business was to go to and fro the island with all speed, bearing the mail; but, with a good steady trawling-breeze, it seemed nothing short of wicked to go piling on sail over all the nice trawling-ground which lay a little to the mainland side of the island. It was so easy to explain to the proprietor a fortnight after, when he discovered that his letters had come to hand a post late, that the wind had fallen light in the night and it had been impossible to make the estuary of the river until the tide had so far ebbed that there was practically no water on the bar. Very often the explanation would have all the merit of truth; and after all it could not matter very much to the bulk of the English nation whether it got its news of Lundy Island a post earlier or a post later. Surely it was infinitely more important that we should not forego the chance of making a nice catch of fish.

The first part of the voyage, after leaving Lundy, was apt to be peculiarly exciting, for then we would often sail right through the troubled waters of Lundy Race. This was not

in any way different from other reaches of troubled water, caused by the meeting of conflicting currents, that go by the same name all round the coast; but it was the only race we knew, and we always looked forward to its encounter with a tremulous excitement. The smack went larking and bounding through the water which swept the deck with each successive wave, arousing the crabs and lobsters to a state of extreme liveliness. If the waves were breaking with any force, we were consigned to the obscurity of the cabin, whence we crept up the companion way till our heads were on a level with the perambulant crustaceans, and we could see the mysterious scene—the ship ploughing her way over the dark sea, the dim figures of the men moving here and there as the skipper shouted his commands, and an occasional white splash of a wave on the deck which gleamed as a ray from the port or starboard light fell on it. It was a scene that made us think of Grettir the Strong and all the heroes of the Sagas that people had told us about; we fancied ourselves hardy Norsemen and brave Vikings, and felt all the braver so soon as the smack had made her way out of the breakers of the race into calmer water. It was curious that the smoother the water fell the more confident we were that the heart of the storm was our true native element.

As soon as our trawl-net was put down we became increasingly doubtful of it.

Of course the ever-moving sea has a wonderful variety in its movements, and different movements affect different people in different ways. Some especially dislike the roll; to others the pitch is peculiarly fatal; some endure with fortitude the motion of a following sea, but succumb to the tossing of waves that meet them; with others the sensations are reversed. But none of these, which are as it were motions natural to the great fluid body of ocean, compare at all with the discomfort of the uneven motion given to the ship when it is dragging its trawl-net behind. All others are more or less regular, rhythmical motions; but this is a horrid discord. We tried our best to be brave; we strove hard to think of Grettir the Strong, of whom it is never recorded that he was sea-sick, and further endeavoured to sustain our fainting courage by anticipating the delight of seeing the trawl hauled up. So the dark hours sped on, with fortunes that it is not well to chronicle too minutely, and maybe before the morning the trawl would have been hauled up several times.

The delight of seeing it come aboard was glorious. Its possible contents on each occasion were really infinite; we could conceive of nothing that it might not hold. In point of fact

it never did bring up a sea-serpent, but it brought creatures that were quite as marvellous to us; devil-fish, whose very name (their aspect apart) suggested fearfully attractive attributes; octopuses, that lay with many tentacles and a kind of menacing helplessness upon the deck; dog-fish, that were sharks in miniature, with many rows of teeth; queer-shaped thornybacks or skates; and many other curious and uncouth fishes. Besides these and their congeners, in which we took an especial interest, there was all the tribe of more edible fishes; soles of various kinds and plaice, john dories, brill and turbot, flapping their great flatnesses on the boards of the deck. It formed an entrancing scene under the fitful gleam of the ship's lantern, which scarcely bettered the soft summer moonlight.

And then, towards morning, we would have "upped trawl," put the dinghy, which had been taken on board while the net was down, out to tow behind again, and be bearing into the line of breakers that marked the bar at the river's mouth. But about this time it would generally happen, hardy Vikings though we were, that all the excitement we had gone through would prove too much for us, and we would go off to sleep amidst the thousand and one mingled odours of the cabin. In our dreams we would hear the wash of the waves against the vessel,

accompanying the shrill chorus of a multitude of gulls attracted by the rich repast that the sailors kept throwing overboard for them as they cleaned the fish. The gulls waited on the vessel in a clamouring throng. Now and again they would swoop, with a united rush, at a fragment of waste fish hurtling through the air. Sometimes one or other would seize and swallow it before ever it came to the water's surface; or again it would fall on the water and at once a fierce tug of war would begin for its possession. Sometimes one would seem to prove his title to a certain morsel, and he would be left far behind, sitting on the waves, discussing it, while the rest of our satellites pursued us as before, with ceaseless clamour. And after a while this laggard, having disposed of his portion, would rise heavily off the sea and come labouring after us.

All the sounds of this comedy of hunger and the struggle for existence would come to our dozing ears in the stuffy little cabin, forming the substance of our dreams; and the next noise to arouse us would be the rattling of the anchor-chain, when we would stretch ourselves and open sleepy eyes, and go blinking up the companion-way to find that we were back in port, and that there was nothing more for us to do than to trudge away along a mile or two of dusty road to our home.

But the joy of that expedition was not yet altogether over. While we were actually engaged in it there had been discomforting sensations that would intrude themselves, no matter how we tried to ignore them; but in the delightful retrospect all these completely vanished; nothing but the joys remained, and there was an added joy in the triumph of detailing all our adventures to Authority at home; and Authority, prosaic though it was, had yet some sparks of enthusiasm left which might be kindled into genuine fire by the recital of deeds of sea-faring so heroic and so remote from its own experiences.

And really we had some adventures worthy of record. On a certain morning, as the smack went stealing out over the bar, helped rather by the tide beneath her than by the breeze which scarcely filled her sails, we passed a strange coil upon the water. It was one of those slumbrous summer mornings on which everything is bathed in the heat-mist that rises from the sea, and the few smacks and coasters that had come out with us became indistinct at a few hundred yards' distance. Therefore we could make out this coil on the water only vaguely. But, as we slipped quietly along, the skipper said, "I'm just going off in the dinghy to see what I can make of that there."

"That there," as we well understood, referred

to the strange appearance; but what we did not understand, nor did the skipper, was the nature of that coil. We observed, however, that he took off with him, in the dinghy, the gaff with which we used to hook up into the boat the big whiting pollack that we sometimes caught in the tideways, with a bait of a bright spinner trailed behind the boat. The gaff excited our interest to a yet keener pitch; it looked as if business were intended. The smack was headed up into the light breeze, and we all watched the skipper's doings as he shoved off in the dinghy. Quietly and slowly he paddled his way to where we could still dimly see the dark coil on the water. He rowed gently, as if with the notion of not disturbing the object of his quest. At length he came to it, and leaning slowly over the boat's side, struck the gaff with a sudden jerk into the coil, which instantly, from an inert, motionless thing, was transformed into a writhing, wriggling creature of intense vivacity. It was a conger. Presumably it had been asleep in the sun, on the water's surface. Now, with the sudden sting of the gaff in its side, it was aroused into the fiercest and most aggressive life, lashing this way and that in the little boat while the skipper skipped about in a manner delightfully suggestive of his title, aiming a shower of blows the while with the gaff at the shining coils that

constantly eluded his assault. The skipper's measures were by no means confined to the offensive, for everywhere that the creature's head appeared, now under this thwart, now over that, in its furious wrigglings, it showed a great mouth menacing him with clashing jaws. Presently, however, he got some decisive blows home upon the creature's head; its writhings grew feebler, and soon the battle was over and the victory rested with our friend. He sculled back in triumph, with the body of the foe as the trophy of the fight. It is needless to say how tumultuously we greeted his return, congratulating him on his skill, and sharing his triumph over the body of the vanquished. Truly it was a remarkable achievement, thus to have gaffed into the boat the person of a free and unscathed conger. To catch a conger asleep is an opportunity that does not occur to many in a lifetime.

Towards evening a breeze sprang up and we got home on the evening tide. On the way we fell in with a boat that had been dredging, illegally as we believed, for oysters, and of them we bought fifty-two (being the whole of the catch), each about the size of a soup-plate, for a shilling. We thought we had done a fine stroke of housekeeping finance, rating the value of the oyster according to its size. When we reached

home Authority looked with distrust upon our shell fish, disdainfully pronouncing them cooking-oysters, and thus showing yet again its persistent disposition to belittle our best achievements.

CHAPTER XII

THE HIGHLANDS AND THE ISLANDS

At about this point in the story came news of a tragedy occurring in India to those parents of Bob Burscough who were engaged in the mysterious work of shaking the pagoda tree. I do not think that Bob himself had any clear idea about the details, for he certainly told me all that, as a boy, he did know. My hunting had put us apart a little, because he had nothing to ride—except our donkey on which he had taken his first lessons, with me, in falling off. But in everything except the riding we were as much one as ever, and saw each other every day in the holidays. For all that, I have even now the vaguest idea of the details of that tragedy in the East, which made a big difference in Bob's life, and, incidentally, a little temporary difference in my own. It is enough, at all events, to know that Mr. and Mrs. Burscough, Bob's father and mother, died suddenly and tragically, leaving the Colonel as Bob's guardian. It also seemed, when

there was time to look into the financial side, that much golden fruit had been the result of the pagoda-tree shaking, and that Bob would be a rich man when he came of age. In the meantime a good share of the income of the money was left to Colonel Burscough with a very free hand in his disposal of it to the best advantage in Bob's education and recreation.

It was a prospect that held promise, and we discussed it in many aspects, mutually debating largely what, and what first of all, it behoved Bob to buy. He showed a generous pleasure in talking of the many things he intended—an intention amply fulfilled—to give me. Yet, over all, was a sentiment which did us credit, that it was not altogether right that we should thus speak of the golden future, when it was all owed to that tragedy of which we knew but dimly and spoke under our breaths. Bob had been at home so long that his parents were really hardly any more than names to him. It could not affect us like the loss of Viper or any of our pets, but still—there was an awesome sentiment about it all.

After the business details were more or less cleared up, the first thing the Colonel did, acting readily enough I expect on Bob's instigation, was to hire a sailing yacht and since, when you have a sailing boat, the next essential seems to

be a place to sail to, he rented a shooting, where was said to be fine anchorage for a yacht, in the island of Skye. Colonel Burscough had shot over the same ground the two previous years, but had then stayed at a roadside inn. Now, however, he had succeeded in getting his landlord to set in order a disused house upon the property, and was thus able to offer hospitality to a moderately large party.

We went up from Glasgow in the yacht, and arrived upon the third or fourth day at Portree, where we met the Burscoughs' servants crossing by steamer from Strome Ferry. It was most amusing to see the undisguised contempt of this essentially Sassenach crew for their Gaelic surroundings. We watched them trail up the steep street, hung about with band-boxes and bundles like a Cheap Jack's waggon, and having seen them comfortably installed for the night in the hotel, went back to the yacht and turned in, in preparation for an early start. We weighed anchor with the sun to cruise round and meet the servants at Runish, where the shooting was, in the evening.

The Colonel's out-of-door factotum, a Celt of hardy aspect and peaty flavour, we found awaiting us on the little stone jetty of the loch, as we rowed ashore after bringing the yacht to her moorings. He clasped his Scotch bonnet

with both hands upon the pit of the stomach in an attitude eloquent of self-depreciation and respect for his superiors. There was no shadow of a doubt of the warmth of our welcome from this faithful dependent.

We landed a few hundred yards from the house, which stood at the head of the loch. A burn, where the little brown trout jostled each other, and the sea-trout came up, for change of air, in autumn, ran past the kitchen door. The bridge of the mail-coach road spanned the burn just beside the house. Up on the hillsides were the little "black houses" of the crofters of the township of Runish—low stone huts, peat-thatched, dark, peat-smoky; half of each tenanted by the human family, half by the cattle beasts which they owned. Near Colonel Burscough's house were the kennels, for the pointers and setters, and behind the kennels the mill where the crofters got their meal ground on payment of a certain measure—corresponding to the old "gowpen," or handful, of the Eastern counties—out of each sack.

In the course of our first dinner the cook came bursting into the room with eyes aflame.

"Oh lor, Sir!" said she. "Oh lor, Sir! This 'ouse is *full* of rats!"

Now Eliza probably knew "*full* of rats" to be merely a way of speaking; nevertheless, very

brief examination of the premises revealed the presence of rats, visible, and in the flesh, in numbers such as it had never entered into the imagination of any of us to conceive before. With military promptitude Colonel Burscough recognised the gravity of the situation and initiated his plan of campaign.

"Mc'Bain," he said (Mc'Bain was the name of the Celtic factotum), "go out and borrow a cat from the crofters. Borrow two. Borrow twenty."

About the end of dinner word came that Mc'Bain wished to speak to our host. We all went into the kitchen. Mc'Bain was there, with a pleased smile on his face and grasping in his hand the neck of a large sack which writhed felinely. He thrust in his other hand and drew forth a cat, observing, in the "English as she is spoke" by those whose native tongue is Gaelic—"See, where iss one!"

He repeated the performance, and the observation, seven times, not noticing, apparently, that each grimalkin traced an ensanguined railway track down the back of his hand. As he deposited the seventh cat on the floor, he said, "It iss all;" and stood, with the same well-pleased smile on his face, and the blood running off him, watching the seven brethren as they suspiciously examined their surroundings.

That night those cats must have had a foretaste, as from a feline Pisgah, of the happy hunting-grounds. We got but little sleep. The noise was like nothing less than a troop of cavalry at full gallop within all the wainscotings. In the morning the cats, considerably bulkier than overnight, stole plethorically away to their respective "black homes," and Mc'Bain was sent on the shooting-pony to Portree for strychnine. The following night the noise was less—it was as though infantry had relieved the cavalry. On the succeeding night there was silence, as of the grave. Then, for a week, we were in terror, expecting an intolerable stench. But it did not come: the burn ran too near: the poisoned rats had doubtless betaken themselves thither to quench their thirst. We were free!

Of the whole episode what most struck us was the readiness with which the crofters lent their cats to us, the alien Sassenachs, in our distress.

Another point relative to the cats that drew our attention, was that the hairs had all been cut away from within their ears; and this we learned was done to prevent them from going out at night in pursuit of game, for the dew getting into their unprotected ears makes them prefer the comforts of the "black house." Such, at least, is the crofter's theory. On many matters

their information is original. Mc'Bain told us that a man of his acquaintance had killed a mad dog; but in the struggle some of the dog's blood had got upon his leg, "and four weeks later she" (referring to the man) "was on the roof of her house without any clothes, and her wife wass cut up in four quarters in the house." Such was Mc'Bain's tersely graphic description of the effects of what is probably a rather exceptional instance of hydrophobic poisoning through the skin.

He told us another curious fact in Natural History which is well worth knowing. "Eff you wass stabbed by a snake, and the snake wass getting to the watter first, then you would most likely die," he said. "But ef you wass getting to the watter first, then the snake would die: and there wass a boy at Broadfoot—she wass stabbed by a snake; and she wass run to the watter, and the snake was run to the watter alongside; and she wass jump into the watter first, and the snake burst before her eyes."

The Skyemen are very like children. They can attach themselves with an unreasoning devotion which is almost canine to a kind master, and the poverty which has in so many instances driven the proprietor out of the Highlands is therefore peculiarly to be regretted. It is, in a great measure, the very qualities which render

the Highlander so valuable under the control of military discipline, or personal affection, that make him as unfitted as a dog or a child for steering his own path through the intricacies and temptations of political agitation.

Grouse-shooting is a theme whose glories have been done to death with pen and pencil; yet there is a more than ordinary charm in its surroundings in the Western Highlands and Islands, where loch, sky, sea and mountain work together to show you Nature's splendours. From the higher moor the crofters' black houses look more like little peat-stacks than dwellings. The little squares of their arable crofts, of eight acres each, are dark with potato or light with a thin crop of short oats. Here and there a patch in which oats were sown shows nothing but a blaze of gaudy, useless golden flowers. The soil is poor, and the climate, especially by reason of the terrific wind storms, almost intolerable to the agriculturalist. There are sheep grazing about upon the hillsides, and what the Scotch call "cattle beasts," notably a black bull which kept one of our party up to his neck in a burn, where he was fishing for brown trout, for a whole summer's afternoon.

Each crofter has twelve sheep and two cattle beasts, whose pasturage is included in his rent of £1 per acre—*i.e.* £8 in all—and for this he

gets also the services of the landlord's factor as manager of the joint-stock sheep farm under the check of two auditors, locally termed "members," appointed by the crofters out of their own body. We were given to understand that Mc'Bain was a man of consideration among the crofters, but, as yet, scarcely old enough—he was about fifty—to be a member. No doubt age is held in greater veneration in proportion to the primitiveness of the society.

Almost the first day of the grouse-shooting Mc'Bain fell into dire disgrace. It was his duty to lead the pony that carried the game and the lunch. He left the pony for a moment, while he went round the bend of a hill to fetch a wounded bird, and on his return the pony was gone! His consternation could not have been greater had he lost his wife. He set about looking for the pony under tufts of grass and down drains which would not have sheltered a field-mouse, and it was not till late in the day that he at length reappeared, limping horribly, but triumphantly leading the pony, "which," he explained, "wass that evil she wass tread on my fingers." He meant his "toes." *En revanche*, as it were, he spoke of the "sleeves" of a shirt or a coat as the "legs." Also, the page of grammar which treats of gender must, I think, have been sealed to him, for whereas he called

most things "she," he invariably referred to his wife as "he."

We made no heavy bags on these days after the grouse, nevertheless we loved them as only boys can. Twenty-five brace to four guns was about our average. As in all the islands, the birds lay like stones. They can be shot over dogs all through the season. Perhaps it is the climate that makes Celt and grouse alike slothful. The crofters used to hold day-long informal mass meetings of the unemployed outside the merchant's shop—the merchant being not of the class dear to our childhood, who traded in pearls and Eastern carpets between Bussorah and Bagdad, but the Highland counterpart of the proprietor of the English village "shop," selling most things, from a Gaelic newspaper and bootlaces to fish-hooks and the *Oban Times*. Runish, at this season of the year, indeed, was peopled exclusively, almost, by the unemployed; for the young and hearty were away for their eight weeks at the East Coast herring fishing, whence, with luck, they would return with some £20 in their pockets, the greater portion whereof would be swamped by their outstanding debt to "the merchant," and the margin remain as a very slender provision for the exigencies of the coming winter. To be in debt to the merchant is a recognised and respectable form of liability

among the crofters, but they had rather starve than borrow of each other. Colonel Burscough had a story that a winter or two back a man had obtained some turnips on credit from a friend to feed, as he said, his cow. A week later it was found that these turnips had been the sole support of himself and his family during all those days. That there is, at times, great misery among the crofting population is beyond question.

The first year that Colonel Burscough was there, when the potato disease was very bad amongst them, he had given the crofters of Runish a large number of seedling potatoes. They accepted these gratefully; but endeavouring, in their Highland pride, to make him some return, they inundated us with gifts of butter, of milk, and of eggs, all of them pervaded by the eternal flavour of the black-house peat. The first time that our clothes returned from the wash, it seemed as if the people, suspecting us of some infectious plague, must have fumigated our garments. Everything that enters into the black house is impregnated by the flavour of the peat-smoke. In a general way this is not unnatural, seeing that chimneys are rather the exception, and in most houses the smoke has to find a way for itself through the thatch, or stop inside; but how the peat taste gets inside a hen's egg beats

old King George and the apple-dumpling. More satisfactory presents than these black-house flavoured luxuries were the fresh herrings which, as the season advanced, they used to bring us. This was only, however, when "there wass word that there wass herring in the loch;" for the Skyemen have no properly decked boats wherewith to follow the herring into the open Minch. Possibly Government might do something for them, as in some of the outer islands the proprietors have done, by giving them help in this direction.

Colonel Burscough, as autocrat of the breakfast table, had passed a rule which, though it savour of an apparent greediness, can be commended to all similarly situated — viz. that whatsoever special dainty, bird, beast, fish, or vegetable were shot, caught, found, etc., should be eaten by the shooter, catcher, finder thereof. When, under other auspices, one sees a Jack Snipe bandied about a round table of knights, each too chivalrous to deprive another of the delicacy, this rule finds its justification; and even the joy to the palate of a golden plover is dearly purchased at price of the envy, hatred, and malice of a whole shooting-party.

Indeed, we fared by no means badly. It is true we had to eat our way steadily through a sheep, with a monotony that served us for an

almanack; by the joint that appeared on table we knew how many days through a sheep we had gone. On the first day came the haggis, which tasted high then, and we steadily worked on till all was consumed. But our variety lay in grouse, in plover, in snipe, in fish of all kinds, from brown trout and sea-trout, with an occasional salmon, to sea-fish proper, lobsters, and shell-fish of all sorts. Oyster-catcher soup was a discovery, and an excellent one—better than hare. The sea-fish we caught mostly in a trammel-net set in the tideway, and left all night; the sea-trout in a long seine-net set at dusk across a burn's mouth, into which net the trout were then frightened by splashing from up the burn towards the net. The moving lanterns, the gleaming fish, the silvery drippings from the net, and the dark moving forms and boats against the still background of dark water, made this a picturesque scene. Unsportsmanlike maybe; but we had no option in absence of a "spate" to enable the sea-trout to get up the burns, where we could catch them with fly.

But we had fine fun out at sea with the lythe —great big fish running up to twenty pounds, and full of play. We fished for them with a spinning bait and an india-rubber eel trailing behind the boat, which we kept rowing in the tideway. The rod was two-jointed, very strong with

whalebone top. When the lythe strikes, he bores downwards, and if he once gets among the weeds at the bottom, he stays there, and so do your spinner and your temper. When quite fresh, the lythe is excellent eating; but if you are on a small yacht, and your *chef* is an old man-of-war hand, as was our case, you had better not go and see how the cooking is done. I saw it once. Jack—that was the cook's name—was watching some simmering soup, and peeling potatoes with his jack-knife. When one potato was completely peeled, he found that the part he had last held was black from his fingers and thumb. So he peeled off the grime; meanwhile the other side of the potato became rich brown, and in its turn claimed the attention of his knife. By sundry repetitions of this process the potato was reduced to about the size of a gooseberry, and acquired a uniform yellow griminess. He looked at what remained of the vegetable with a heavy sense of the eternal indestructibility of grime, and throwing it into the pan, commenced treating another on similar principles. Then, noticing that the fire in the little stove wanted poking, he poked it—with his forefinger. The soup needing stirring, he stirred it—with the same forefinger. I went on deck, and, being a boy, was soon hard at work on the dinner that I had thus seen in

preparation, but it needs to be a boy to enjoy these things.

There is no part of the world for yachting that can touch the West Coast of Scotland—provided, which is exceptional, you get tolerable weather. Where will you find such variety of scenery, as the outlines of the mountains and islands unravel themselves; as the swift changes of sky and drift upon the hills, or the colour of the water, warn you of the squall that is on you and past you so quickly out of these mountain gorges? At one place the land looms above you in great up-sweeping sheets of grassy down. At another a grotesque, beetling cliff overshadows you; or again the columnar basalt which scarcely looks as if Nature's careless hand had made it. Now and again, you will pass the ruins of a castle built upon the very edge of a promontory, looking away over the Minch, with but a narrow causeway from the mainland leading up to it; and scarcely the most prosaic of us but would conjure up some vision of yellow-haired Vikings plying wild war around the base of the cliff, while, from above, the chief and his retainers rained down their missiles—far enough from the reality, perhaps, but none the less alluring to the fancy. Then you will go past a colony of puffins, which come out in denser masses than a swarm of bees; or you will get among a shoal

of herring, with myriads of sea-birds of all sorts preying upon them, and so loaded with fish that they can only lift themselves an inch or so from the water, to flip along out of the boat's way. And then some one will see a whale blowing out in the Minch, and you all look emulously to be the first to sight his next appearance. One day, going by a shoal of herring, we came so near a gannet asleep on the water, with his head under his wing, that we almost caught him; and McBain told us that once, at night, a gannet had got itself entangled in the nets of his boat, and frightened him with his great, white, flapping wings, for he thought it was the ghost of his father—but what the distinctive features were by which he thought to identify the ghostly individuality, he either would not, or could not, confide to us.

Some of their fancies are strange. Fairies, they will tell you, frequent streams of running water. Bob Burscough, having sorely rent the seat of his trousers, the journeyman of the township—a sort of general utility man, who mends your drains or your cisterns or, as before indicated, your trousers—was summoned to repair them. The job being still unfinished at dusk, and his home across a branch of the burn, he declined to stay and finish it for fear of the fairies, except on one condition: that a little

child should be sent home with him. The child was to come back by itself. They said that the fairies would not molest a child, or any one who is with a child. It is a pretty fancy. The journeyman, under the child's protection, got home quite safe.

It did not fall to our lot to witness a crofter's funeral, but we were informed that the ceremonial had some singular features. The corpse is borne to the place of burial in a cart, on which is also carried a cask of whisky. The mourners form a procession before the cart, with the chief mourner in front bearing a whisky bottle, from which drinks are offered to all whom the procession encounters. The bottle is replenished from the cask, and it is said to be counted a great affront to refuse the proffered dram. At none of their religious ceremonies are instruments of music of any kind permitted. Bob did indeed assert that they admitted the Jew's harp, believing it to be the instrument with which David scared away the evil spirit that vexed Saul. If this view be correct, there is some justification for the mon arch's hasty use of the javelin; but Bob was a boy of original imagination. One of our party, on his first sight of a Highlander in full dress, was simple enough to ask Bob to point out to him the Highlander's pibroch—he pronounced it "pie-brooch"—and Master Robert promptly told

him that it was the clasp which held together the skirts of the kilt, of his own accord volunteering the further information that when the clasp was replaced by a pin the latter was then called a "hoolichan."

The people are responsive to the charm of music. We got a piper from Portree, and Eliza gave a crofter's ball, in return for much black-house hospitality in the shape of tea and syllabub-fights. The day before the ball we took the piper out in the yacht, and as he tucked the bag under his arm, like Alice in Wonderland with her flamingo croquet-mallet, and sent the weird strain skirling across the waters of the loch, and up the glens and hillsides, we saw the people ever so far away coming out before their houses and shuffling and jigging in the steps of the reel. The ball was a *succès fou.* The gun-room was the ball-room. It was not lofty. Indeed, one tall crofter, in the energy of the dance, perpetually hit his head against the ceiling, bringing down little avalanches of the plaster—for which he subsequently apologised most courteously—yet never allowing the mishap to interfere with the vigour of his dancing.

Reels, reels, reels, nothing but reels all night, with an occasional interval for a Gaelic song of most monotonous melody, and, as we were told, though we did not understand a syllable, of most

monotonous words. Jack, also, sang—Jack, our *chef* from the yacht—and such a voice, too! It nearly brought the house down literally, as it quite did metaphorically. We could never induce him to sing on board the yacht—he used to say he had lost his voice (it would assuredly have incommoded the man who chanced to find it!), but the skipper told us the real reason of his reluctance. His last effort had been in the parlour at home, and he had then sung till his grandmother's nose bled—she was a very old woman and it was a most dangerous thing, and Jack had then and there registered a vow never to sing again. This vow he had broken under the genial influence of Eliza's party and whisky; and the atmosphere of the gun-room, where peat flavour and whisky were proving but inadequate substitutes for oxygen, was noticeably cleared by it. They kept up the dance until four in the morning, and went away delighted, and very few of them tipsy.

Yet they are an austere people. The profane Saxon who is tempted by the inviting look of sky and water to fish for the dainty sea-trout on the Sabbath, will be made to feel the ill-will which any such disregard of their conscientious scruples will entail. The merchant was the most austere of all. A weather-bound ship came into the loch, one Sunday during our stay, with a

crew of nine men. They had been lying-to, short of provisions, in the Minch, and had not tasted food for thirty-eight hours. They came to the merchant and asked for bread—they offered him money, they besought him, they threatened him; but not a bite would he give those starving men because he was a religious man and it was the Lord's day! A neighbouring proprietor, hearing of their case, sent them a sheep; otherwise no one knows what might have happened to the merchant.

And no one can spend an autumn in Skye without bearing away with him a most lasting impression—skin-deep only—of two insect pests. First, about the time that the primitive sickles are cutting the late hay harvest and driving the ever craking corn-crake out of his favourite haunt—about this season appear, in hosts, the horse-flies, whose local name is "clegg." A dark coat, which they probably affect rather on account of its greater warmth than for any æsthetic reasons, is almost immediately covered by them; and when they bite they mean business, and draw blood. They infest the country for a fortnight and then vanish, and after an interval of two or three days are succeeded by a creature to which, in spite of its smaller bulk, the "clegg" is not a circumstance. This is no other than the midge, the common midge; but it is hardly possible

for any one who has had experience merely of the English midge to form an idea of what he can be in the Western Highlands. No stronger proof of their power can be given than that we have known a keen fisherman leave a rising salmon to get anywhere away from them. They are perhaps a little worse round the burns—like the fairies—than elsewhere, but they are pretty ubiquitous. They get into your eyes, your ears, your nose; you breathe midge, you eat midge, and midge eats you; a myriad of them eat you at the same moment. Happily, "little Master Midge," as Bob used to call him, is no mariner. On the water you are free from him. So, on the water we spent most of his brief but despotic reign.

CHAPTER XIII

A VERY CURIOUS ACCOUNT OF THE ISLAND OF ST. KILDA

A GREAT many people have been to Skye, despite the hardships of the journey, for the English are an adventurous race, but Skye is but half-way—nay, but a fraction of the way—to a much less familiar and more remote island—the island of St. Kilda.

I ought, perhaps, to have mentioned before that the party—the more or less permanent party, so to say, besides guests coming from time to time for a day or two—in Skye included an old friend of Colonel Burscough's, a certain Professor Flegg. Mr. Flegg was a man of prodigious learning. In what particular line his learning lay I was always afraid to ask, but I fancy that it was almost universal—in all lines. Not only so, but he was incomparably the most modest, courteous, and self-depreciating man I have ever met. One of the principal pleasures which Bob expected from our autumn

in Skye was the observation of the Professor, whom he profanely termed "old Flegg."

"You'll see," he said, "old Flegg 'll be rigged out in a high hat and a paper collar and a kilt; you see if he isn't."

In this alluring prospect we were disappointed. "Old Flegg" wore much the same clothes—rusty black—as it is to be supposed that he wore in London, with the addition of a "fore and aft" cap, which did not at all look as if it belonged to him. We had considerable entertainment, however, in instructing Mr. Flegg in the use of the gun.

"I have observed, my dear sir," he said, with his deferential courtesy, "I have observed that firearms are safest when carried at the port."

Putting this conclusion into practice, he used to stride over the moor with his "firearm" held perpendicularly, with both hands in front of him, recalling to mind the hare in Struwelpeter who has stolen the huntsman's gun. What made him a less desirable companion on the moor was that Bob had insidiously advised him to "Swing your gun when you fire, Professor, so as to make the shot scatter more"; which advice, zealously followed by the Professor, "scattered" not only the shot, but the whole shooting party.

For all and sundry such counsels the

Professor always expressed his courteous gratitude—surely the most simple-minded of learned men!

Now, the Professor, in common with the rest of us, experienced a yearning desire to know something of that lonely little island of St. Kilda, away out, all by itself, weathering the Atlantic storms, far beyond those outer Hebrides whose outlines we could well distinguish, across the Minch, from the northern corner of Skye. Professor Flegg had suffered cruelly in crossing even that small nearly land-locked offshoot of the Minch betwixt Skye and the mainland; for of the Flegg that arrived at Strome Ferry but Flegg $-x$ (an unknown but large quantity) reached Portree. *A fortiori*, to what power would not that unknown x be raised in crossing that stretch of open Atlantic which lay betwixt us and St. Kilda! Professor Flegg concluded, therefore, to satisfy by proxy his scientific interest in the remote island.

We talked much beforehand of our intention of visiting it, and were greatly confirmed in our purpose by the incredulity shown by Colonel Burscough about the chances of our ever getting there. As the steamer was advertised to start for St. Kilda at an unseasonably early hour in the morning, Bob and I set off after dinner, and drove into Portree the

evening before. Arriving at the chief hostelry at about 11 p.m., we fought our way through a dense atmosphere of peat and tobacco smoke, to be informed by the host that a large meeting of the Landlord Abolition Society, or some such philanthropic evangel, was being held in the town. The crofters had mustered in great force, as was apparent from the all-pervading atmosphere of peat-smoke by which they are ubiquitously attended. All the beds in the hotel were taken, and crofters were slumbering, several deep, both on and below the billiard-table. Menaces, bribes, and entreaties succeeded in securing for our use two chairs apiece, on which we betook ourselves to such rest as we might snatch, after bidding the waiter, on pain of death, wake us in time in the morning to catch the steamer for St. Kilda.

What with the discomfort of the couch and the Gaelic snores of the circumjacent crofters I was but in my first beauty sleep when the waiter lightly touched me on the shoulder.

"The boat will be awa' in half an hour," said he.

"Indeed," I said, and glanced at Bob, who slept profoundly. "Hush!" I whispered to the waiter. "Is it a fine morning?"

"Na'," said he, "it's a gae stormy morn."

"Then go away again," I whispered; "and,

whatever you do, don't wake us till the boat's clean away."

For a quarter of an hour I was uneasy—terribly anxious lest Bob should awake in time for us to catch the steamer. At length I heard her whistle, and sank peacefully to rest as if I were on a bed of eiderdown.

"I say—hi!" It was Bob's voice that awoke me about an hour later. "I say, what time is it?"

"About eight, I think," I said, looking at my watch.

"Eight!" he said. "But the steamer goes —I mean went—at seven!"

"So I believe," I said.

"Oh lor! and that confounded waiter never woke us!"

"That confounded waiter" had a very severe time of it with Mr. Robert Burscough a few minutes later. The waiter asserted that he had awakened me at half-past six, and that I had then told him to go away and not come back till the boat had gone.

"You see," I said to Bob, "it must be that wretched trick I have of talking in my sleep."

At all events the steamer was gone. There was not much good waiting for the next, for it did not go for six weeks.

"The question is," as Bob said, "what are

we to do? We cannot possibly go back and let on we've never been. We'd better cruise about for three days somewhere, and then go back and tell them that we've been there."

We decided we would go a walking tour. Its distance was to be determined at the pleasure of the one who should first call a halt; the pace of walking by the pace of him who walked the slower. This understanding is as indispensable to the success of a pedestrian tour as of a cavalry charge.

"Tell you what we might do," Robert Burscough suggested; "get leave from the Sheriff to fish the Skœbost. We can borrow rods here and send them back from Sligachan to-morrow."

The Skœbost, the pride of Skye, recalls forcibly, by the colour and velocity of its waters, the Regent's Park Canal. It meanders sluggishly through low-lying moorland. It runs deep between its banks, and only in a storm of wind and rain are its waters sufficiently troubled for the artificial fly to delude the eye of the hungry salmon. These conditions were excellently fulfilled on the present occasion, but few fish were in the river, and we caught but one—a nine-pound grilse.

The grilse we presented to the innkeeper's wife at Sligachan, which we reached about nightfall, thoroughly soaked to the skin. We

went to bed while our clothes were dried and our salmon cooked; then got up to eat him, and then to bed again to sleep him off.

A quaint little place is that Sligachan, beneath the overwhelming Cuchullins. It is your duty to go up one of the Cuchullins every day that you are at Sligachan, but we left our duty undone. We took it very easy. We strolled along the not too uneven tenor of our way, encountering in each corrie a fresh bevy of tourists. Each tourist carried a long crook-handled stick, to show he was a Scotchman, but dropped his "h's," which he had left behind in London. There was great excitement among one party of them. One of its members was gazing through a telescope at a stag which he saw on the mountain-side. When his eye was satisfied with seeing, he handed his glass to another of his party, who gave a prolonged "whew-ew-ew!" to indicate his appreciation of the noble animal, and handed the telescope to another. When they had all looked and "whew-ew-ew-ed," they politely invited Bob and myself to look also. We looked and "whew-ew-ew-ed"; then gave the telescope back to the tourists, thanked them, and went our way.

After this it seemed, as the novelists say, as if an indefinable something had come between

us. We were not to each other what we had been. I determined that I would make a clean breast of it.

"Bob," I said, "did you see that stag?"

"Well," said he, "did you?"

"Well, I really was not certain whether I made it out quite clearly or not. There was something, you know, that perhaps might have been a stag."

"Yes; that was just my feeling too," he said. "It might have been a stag, you know."

"Oh yes," I said, "it might have been a stag, but I do not think I can honestly say that I saw one."

"Well, I don't think I should like to swear to it either," he said.

"It is a great pity," I said; "I should like to have seen one."

We afterwards heard that there are no deer on that part of the Cuchullins.

After this explanation we proceeded in much harmony to call at the house of a friend, with whom we spent the greater part of the day in sea-otter hunting. We were in luck to fall in for this fun, which can only be followed at low tides. These Skye sea-otters are not the sea-otter from which the finest fur is taken, but are mere river-otters come down to the sea-side for change of air. They live in cairns by the sea-

side, from which they can be ousted by a plucky terrier; but in most states of tide the bolt-hole is so near the sea that they are out and under water before you can get a shot at them. We visited one or two cairns in vain, much to the disappointment of the three terriers, each of which was an exact facsimile of the other two. We cruised about from cairn to cairn in a little yacht, with the three small doggies in the dinghy towing behind. Failing their otter-bait, they fell on each other tooth and nail, for exercise, and continued the contest regardless of rebuke until their master drew the dinghy alongside, and, seizing the nearest doggie by the tail, hauled him on board the yacht, with the others, who had a fast hold with their teeth, depending from him like a string of sausages.

At the third cairn we were more successful. A fine worrying in the heart of the cairn of stones was succeeded by a rush and scramble, and out bolted an old otter, followed by one half-grown. With a bang! bang! our host had bagged them both, whilst songs of thanksgiving went up from the mouths of all the fishes who beheld it.

By afternoon of the next day we reckoned it time we should return from St. Kilda. The evening was mainly occupied with preparing an account of the voyage and the island. This was

the easier that we knew almost nothing at all about it. Our scope was practically unlimited. We thought it likely, however, that we knew as much as Colonel Burscough or Professor Flegg, so that any departure from the truth was likely to be undetected. Bob assured me that he knew there were native cavalry upon the island, because he had lately read in *Truth* of a gentleman holding a commission in the "St. Kilda Horse."

"They're something like the Maltese Fencibles, or the Cape Mounted Rifles, you know," he said. But this did not seem much on which to base an exhaustive account of the island and its general society.

"It seems to me," I said, "as if I remembered hearing that they live almost entirely on one animal, like the Esquimaux on the reindeer, or the North American Indians on the buffalo. I wish I could remember the name of the animal, but, of course, it's some sort of seal. It couldn't be anything else. I expect we shall have to call it 'a peculiar species of seal.'"

I was very sorry that I could not remember the proper name of the creature. I puzzled over it all the evening, out could not get it. Just, however, as I was lighting my candle to go to bed the idea seemed to flash out with the match.

"I've got it," I said triumphantly. "Foumart —that's it. I am pleased to have remembered.

That'll make the whole thing all right. It won't be so very far from the truth now."

"Never mind. So much the better," said Bob. He was disappointed—I could see that—though he strove to make the best of it. It was hard to be forced from the alluring paths of fiction into the hard and stern reality of fact. "I'm glad you've remembered the name," he forced himself to say. "Don't forget it again before morning. Good night!"

We got our account into proper order the next morning, and, timing things well, reached home about five o'clock in the afternoon. A light rain was falling, and down by the mouth of the burn, not far from the house, we beheld a familiar object. It was Professor Flegg. He was sitting on a little stool. He was completely enveloped, save for his head, in a voluminous mackintosh. Over his head he held a large umbrella. He was seated on the brink of the stream, above which stuck out, motionless, his fishing-rod, while through his powerful spectacles he closely watched his cork which wobbled on the water.

"I say, old Flegg clot-fishing!" Bob whispered to me in huge delight.

A "clot" is a very unpleasant confusion of worms and worsted. An eel, endeavouring to disengage a worm, entangles his fangs in the

worsted. The fisherman gently raises him to the top of the water, then gives a violent whip back of the rod over his head, and Master Eel, loosing his toothhold a second too late, finds himself flying a considerable distance up country, where—on dry land—Mr. Man has him at a disadvantage.

As we came upon Mr. Flegg thus assiduously employed, it was evident that an eel was wickedly coquetting with him. Momentary agitation every now and then affected his float, agitation which manifested itself throughout all Flegg—even to the ribs of the umbrella. At length Mr. Flegg prepared for decisive action. He allowed the umbrella to fall backwards. He raised the rod very gently, then whipped it up over his head with such energy that he threw himself backward off the little stool, while the eel, after flying through the air like a pterodactyl, descended very nearly in Bob's eye.

I left Bob to secure and decapitate the eel, while I proceeded to try and separate Mr. Flegg from his umbrella. He had lost his spectacles, without which he could see no more than his spectacles could without him.

"Indeed, my dear sir, I am deeply indebted to you," he said, as I replaced them on his nose. "Has our friend Robert succeeded in securing our quarry?"

The latter came up at the moment with the wriggling but decapitated body of the eel. Mr. Flegg was intensely pleased and excited. He did not care at all that he had ruined his umbrella, which was compound- and complex-fractured and dislocated in all directions. He had caught six eels, and now he insisted upon carrying them home himself. It was but a hundred yards, but six eels are bad to carry. Mr. Flegg would get all but one firmly wedged between his fingers, and then, in putting in the last, the first would wriggle loose, and then one in the middle would come out and demoralize the whole arrangement. It was just like "pigs in clover."

"Their vitality, my dear sir, is truly prodigious," Mr. Flegg justly said. "I have, to-day, my dear sir, been severely bitten by one from which I had already severed the head."

"Oh! now really, Mr. Flegg," Bob ejaculated, "that is trying us a bit too high. How in the world could it bite when it had no head to bite with?"

"It was with the jaws of the severed head that it bit me, my dear sir," Mr. Flegg answered with grave courtesy. "Naturally it was not the headless body."

"I beg your pardon," said Bob. "I did not understand."

Acting on a prearranged plan, we determined to give the family but a very general description of St. Kilda until we arrived at the reading of our written narrative. We reported that we had had a pleasant time, and heard and seen much that was new and strange, and had jotted down, for the edification of the home-stayers, an account of the strange life, habits, and circumstances of the St. Kilda islanders, which Bob promised to read to the company after dinner.

"It was, indeed, considerate of you, my dear sir," said Mr. Flegg, as Bob unrolled his manuscript, "to have been at the pains of committing to writing your doubtless deeply interesting and instructive experiences."

"Not at all, Mr. Flegg; it was a pleasure, I assure you," Bob said pleasantly. "I will pass over," he went on, "an account I have sketched in, principally for my own satisfaction, of the incidents of the voyage—or, perhaps, you would like to hear it?"

No one expressed any fervent desire to do so, so Bob, a little disappointed, said, "Very well; if you don't care for that, I will at once go on to the description of St. Kilda."

"'As you draw near the island,'" he began his reading, "'your ears are assailed by a loud and constantly increasing moaning or bellowing —a weird and dreadful sound, mingling, as it

does, with the roar of the waves which dash ceaselessly upon the precipitous shore. The terrifying noise proceeds from a beast named 'foumart' by the inhabitants of the island, who are entirely dependent on this creature for their food, for the wigwams they live in, and indeed for their very existence. The 'foumart' would appear to be a cross between the right whale and the seal, being amphibious in its habits, and having its dwelling in the caves by the sea-side. It feeds entirely upon fish, in the catching of which it displays an almost incredible swiftness, and it is by taking advantage of this peculiarity that the islanders are enabled to capture it.'"

"Pardon me, my dear sir, but one moment," Mr. Flegg interrupted. "I am indeed at a loss to understand how it can be by taking advantage of its incredible swiftness——"

"*Almost* incredible," Bob softly corrected.

Mr. Flegg acknowledged the correction by an inclination of his head, and repeated his remark in a much amended form: "I do not fully understand, my dear sir, how its undoubtedly marvellous swiftness can at all aid the islanders in effecting its capture."

"No, no, Mr. Flegg; it's not that. It's the peculiarity of its feeding on fish that does that," Bob explained.

"Why, hang it all, boy," said Colonel

Burscough, "there's nothing so very peculiar in that. Why, I eat fish myself sometimes. We all eat fish. You did not go all the way to St. Kilda to find an animal that ate fish!"

"Oh no, indeed, uncle; certainly not. Perhaps I had better go on," said Bob hastily; and as no one moved an amendment he continued the reading of his manuscript:—

"'They'—that's the islanders—'having by some means peculiar to themselves (for they have no apparatus which we should deem at all suitable for such a purpose) contrived to capture a great number of fish, thrust into their bodies' (the fishes' bodies, you know) 'large fishhooks, and setting them floating upon the water at the end of long, stout fishing-lines, watch eagerly until they are pounced upon and swallowed by the voracious foumart——'"

"Pardon me for one instant if I again interrupt you, my dear sir," said Mr. Flegg; "but I think that even you yourself, despite the privilege you have had of exploring the island, must regard it as a singular fact that a people completely destitute of such apparatus as we should deem suitable for the capture of fish, should yet find no apparent difficulty whatever in the procuring of such articles as fishhooks and long fishing-lines!"

"Eh? Yes. Rum thing that, isn't it?" said

Bob, much perplexed. "Did you ask the Master of the Horse about that?" he said, referring to me.

"They are a most peculiar people, Mr. Flegg," I said; "most peculiar. No; I forgot to put that point to the Master of the Horse. I wish I had thought of it, but I did not."

"And who the mischief is the Master of the Horse?" Colonel Burscough asked.

"Oh, don't you know, Uncle?" said Bob with gentle surprise. "He's commander of the cavalry—of the St. Kilda Horse, as they are called. He had a long talk with him," he added, indicating me.

"A very interesting companion," I observed.

"Indeed!" said Colonel Burscough. "Go on, Robert."

"'——voracious foumart,'" said Bob, picking up the thread of his parable. "'No sooner has the dainty fish, with the cruel barbed hook imbedded in it, disappeared down the maw of the foumart, than the islanders, who have been lying in wait, seize the other or shoreward end of the line, fasten it to a horse—or, if necessary, a pair, or even, on occasion, a team—which they have kept in readiness for the purpose, and drive up country, dragging the loudly-bellowing foumart at the end of the rope behind them. The islanders then fall upon

the beast with sharpened stones, loud cries, and pieces of bottle-glass which have been left by previous excursionists to the island, and in an almost incredibly short space of time the foumart is skinned, his flesh laid aside for eating, and his fat carefully preserved for melting down into oil for lamps made out of his own skull.

"'The myriad uses to which these people put this single animal are almost inconceivable. It is to the islanders of St. Kilda what the buffalo is to the North American Indian, the reindeer to the Esquimaux. With its skins they wall their wigwams and make their clothes—which, in form, are a modification of the Highland kilt. Its teeth they use for necklaces, earrings, and other ornamental purposes. Its flesh is their sole means of subsistence——"'

"Can it be, my dear sir, that they eat none of the fish which, as you have stated in your most interesting and instructive description, they capture in such numbers as bait for the allurement of the voracious foumart?" asked Mr. Flegg.

"You asked the Master of the Horse that question, I think," said Bob, referring again to me, "and he said 'no fish.'"

"'No fish,' said the Master of the Horse," I replied.

"'With regard to the social habits of the

islanders,'" Bob resumed, "'we were unable, I regret to say, to learn any details. So far as we could gather, however, cannibalism is almost unknown among them, except under stress of the greatest pressure; and even in those circumstances it is only the very old or the very young —those, in fact, who are unfit for work, that is for foumart hunting—who fall victims. Other details, many of them, doubtless, of absorbing interest, we were unable to gather, owing to the great difficulty of conversing with a savage people, ignorant of every language but their own——'"

"Pardon my once more interrupting you, my dear sir," said Mr. Flegg, "but I had understood that our friend here had conversed at no inconsiderable length with the Master of the Horse, who indeed proved, I believe I am correct in stating, a most interesting companion!"

"Gestures, Mr. Flegg—purely by gestures," I explained.

"Must have been a *blamed* interesting companion," the Colonel observed dryly.

"I have frequently read and heard it stated, my dear sir," said Mr. Flegg, addressing Colonel Burscough, "that amongst savage peoples the faculty of conversing by means of gestures has reached a degree of development quite inconceivable to us who have had few occasions for

the interchange of our ideas through such a medium."

"You're quite right, Mr. Flegg," I said. "It's simply inconceivable."

"'When we turn,'" Bob resumed, "'to the geological aspect of St. Kilda, we find everywhere a uniform character of carboniferous limestone and basaltic trap. Igneous formations of every kind——'"

"Oh! hang it all, boy," broke in the Colonel impatiently, "skip all that, for goodness' sake. Go on to the next heading."

"Very well, uncle," Bob answered submissively; and, after turning to a new page and hunting about it for a little while, went on:—"'The flora of this interesting but most bleak-looking island is of the most meagre description. Tufts of stunted, wind-swept grass'"——

"Oh! hang it all, my dear boy, I don't want to hurt your feelings," said the Colonel, "but upon my word, we don't want to hear all that. Haven't you got any more about the people to tell us?"

"Well, I am afraid, do you know, uncle," said Bob slowly, as he turned over the pages, "I am afraid there's nothing more that would interest you very much. You see," he said, as he laid the manuscript reverently on the table, "it's very hard to learn much about the people of a

new country when you can't speak their language. I think I've given you all the information we managed to pick up."

"May I express to you my thanks, my dear sir," said Mr. Flegg, courteously, "for the very interesting information which you have been kind enough to collate for us. Will you permit me the great privilege of re-perusing your manuscript at my leisure? I am convinced that it will contain much of interest to myself, as a man of science, in that portion which you have left unread; for from that which you have been good enough to read to us I have derived not only much entertainment, but much information which to me was new."

"It would be new to most people, I fancy, Mr. Flegg," I said. "There are few who have had the privilege to visit St. Kilda. Bob and I may reckon ourselves uncommonly fortunate."

"Indeed, my dear sir, you may," said Mr. Flegg, as he took up his candlestick and prepared to carry off Bob's manuscript with him to bed.

"Do you think of publishing it, Bob?" Colonel Burscough asked, as we proceeded to follow Mr. Flegg's example.

"Well, I had not thought of it," he answered. "You see, I do not quite know what sort of periodical would care to put it in."

"You might try *Knowledge*," I suggested.

"Yes, I think you'd better," said Colonel Burscough, dryly. "Or, perhaps you'd better first try *Truth*."

"Uncle twigs it's all gammon," Bob whispered to me as we went upstairs, "but we boshed old Flegg to rights."

The next morning, before breakfast, Bob noticed a fresh book on the sitting-room table. It was "Maunder's Treasury of Natural History." One of the leaves was dog's-eared down, and it opened readily at that place. Running his eye idly down the page, Bob's attention was caught by the following heading:—

"Fulmar (*Procellaria glacialis*). A palmiped bird, belonging to the Petrel family."

He read the article through, and then he called me from the breakfast-room.

"Look here," he said, taking me to the table where the book lay open, and pointing to the article under heading "Fulmar."

The concluding sentences ran thus:—"Pennant, speaking of those" (that is, those fulmars) "which inhabit the Isle of St. Kilda, says: 'No bird is of such use to the islanders as this: the fulmar supplies them with oil for their lamps, down for their beds, a delicacy for their tables, a balm for their wounds, and a medicine for their distempers.' The female is said to lay one white

and very brittle egg, which she hatches about the middle of June."

There was a very curious pause as we looked at each other after reading the article.

"Blame me," observed Bob, "if it wasn't a bird! We'd got the name pretty right, too, all but a letter or two; but how the dickens were we going to know it was a bird?"

I was silent.

"It seems to me," he went on plaintively, "a kind of breach of confidence of the fulmar, its being a bird."

"They say its egg's brittle," I said vaguely, not seeking to excuse it, but because no other remark occurred to me.

Bob took no notice of the observation, but turned back to the flyleaf of the book, where he found the name of Mr. Flegg. He pointed to the name with his forefinger, and then he said, "Did you ever read a poem of Bret Harte's—'The Heathen Chinee'?"

"Yes, I have. Why?" I said, thinking the question rather irrelevant.

"Why, it strikes me that Bret Harte studied Ah Sin from Mr. Flegg;" and he shut up the book with a bang, and we went, with much impaired appetites, to breakfast.

The next day the book was gone. Mr. Flegg had probably taken it to his bedroom. Nor did

he ever again allude to the island of St. Kilda and to that creation of a splendid fancy, the foumart, save to thank Bob, with his usual courtesy, when he returned the manuscript.

CHAPTER XIV

LOST AND FOUND

It was a lovely morning that I sallied forth by myself to fish one or more of the small burns that ran across the moor. It was in consequence of the extra number of guests now at the lodge that Bob and I had to take a turn, now and then at some other amusement than the shooting, which could only make sport for a limited number of guns. It is possible that in preoccupation of my mind with the fish which rose greedily I took too little notice of my route as I went along, but, however that may be, it is certain that when I began to think of leaving off and making my way back to the lodge, I had only a very general and vague idea of the direction in which it lay.

I do not mean to say that as soon as I turned my back on the river I believed that I had lost myself, but merely that I had begun to be conscious of that cold chill and kind of arrest of the heart's action that one seems to feel at the first

moment of realisation, or fancied realisation, that all one's landmarks are gone. I had been far out on the moor, fishing a little burn that was famous. The day had been beautiful, but for its midges, and the game little fish, hungry for fly in the stream that was just clearing from the spate, came freely and fought gallantly. I had a basketful. I delayed longer than I should have done beside the water, till the swallows and martins had come down, flying close over the stream's surface, and as I turned away, after putting up my rod, the swallows had gone somewhere to their roosting, and their place as insect-hawks had been taken by the bats. When the bats come out, fish, as a rule, cease to rise—at least, I have found it so, though some speak of great catches with the Coachman or the White Moth. For my own part, when it gets too dark for the fish to see the Blue Dun, I think it is time to be going home. If the fish could see the Blue Dun when I left off that night, it was certainly more than I could do, and even as I turned homeward I felt that I ought to have been on my way sooner.

I believed, however, that I knew my road perfectly. At home, in an armchair, by lamplight, I would have declared that I knew it blindfold; a few days previously it had seemed very familiar country, and I thought that I

remembered all its features. It was only as the dusk gave out and the real dark set in, that I began to appreciate how like each other the dim outlines were of those features that I supposed I knew so well. It was not so much that I did not seem able to see the features by which I had proposed to steer, but that there appeared to be so many of them; the same seemed to be repeated so very often, although I knew that really there ought to be no more than one of its particular kind. Until one has actually tried it, I do not think it possible to imagine how helpless he feels in the dark on the open moorland, even moorland that is known fairly intimately. Neither can one realise without the actual experience how full of hidden pitfalls and occasions of trips and stumbles and falls the moorland is when it becomes so dark that he cannot see where he puts his feet. The actual falling is a very demoralising process, so that after the shock you lose nerve and confidence, and begin to be more doubtful than ever of your steering indications. It was not till after my third serious fall that I began to be really a little dazed, and to find myself wondering what the experience would be like of spending the night under the heather, like Rob Roy or some other Highland cateran—only, unfortunately, I had not so much as a plaid. Of course, what we are

always told is that you are bound to be all right, that you are bound to arrive "somewhere," if you will but follow down the course of a burn. This is quite good advice so far as it goes, but the trouble of it is that sometimes it goes a good deal too far. For one thing, your burn, granting that you are able to "follow it down," as you are told to do, is more likely than not to land you in the low country very many a weary mile from the place where you would be; and, in the second place, this "following down" is not always so easy in practice as it sounds. You will come, here and there, upon deep ravines worn by subsidiary burns, running at right angles into the main one which you are following; and that means that you have to follow them up until you can find a place to cross them, and then follow them down on the other side to their junction with the bigger stream, before you can take up again your main line. And by the time you have done that more than once or twice, a good deal of the night has worn itself away, and you have traversed a good many miles, and are ready to drop down and sleep in the heather of very weariness.

Just as I began to put all these points to myself, a fern-owl, nightjar, or whatever you please to call it, began its "jarring," and if any one can tell from what point of the compass this

purring, mysterious noise arises, he must be a wizard. Presently the bird came, almost brushing my face, when I thought I had heard him "jarring" a long way off, and from the opposite direction to that in which I had seemed to hear him. It is an eerie, uncanny sound, and I followed the bird's flight the yard or two I could see it as it went past; and as I turned my head to do so, I may fairly confess now that my heart stood stock still a moment, and I suffered the sensation of icy cold drops of water trickling down my spine. It was fear, if anything ever was. And this is what caused it. Upon the left, on the crest of the hill, outlined against the sky, stood the high form of a gallows—a weird sight enough by itself on the lonely moorland. But this was a gallows-tree very far indeed from being by itself. It was excellently well attended. Beneath it, in fiendish inhuman glee, danced a form that was hardly human, danced and pranced and anticked and reared in some unholy devil's pranks. The form really was not wholly human. In the darkness I thought at first that, of course, my eyesight was playing me some trick, that this was, beyond doubt, a human form, a human dancer, really; and then, on second looks, I doubted. It positively did not look quite human. The thought dashed through my mind of the warlocks, the fairies, the kelpies; and all this I

discarded as ancient superstition. In a moment I knew—I say "I knew," for the conviction came upon me as of a certain fact—that this was an appearance on the astral plane that I was beholding; it was the gallows-tree on which some poor wretched miscreant had been hanged, and here he was, made visible to my enlightened eyes. Like a flash, too, there went through my mind the words of that famous chorus of Burns to "M'Pherson's Farewell"—

> "Sae rantingly, sae wantonly,
> Sae dauntingly gaed he;
> He played a spring, and danc'd it round,
> Below the gallows-tree."

As I said the words to myself there came plainly to my ears the fiddle's skirl, and I believed it to be that bold freebooter's self.

And the next minute there rose a din of shrill laughter. It was awful. If it had not been plainly absurd to run from such a dancer as that —and over the moor, and in the dark!—I should have run. As it was, I stood stock still and tried to cry out. But I could not cry. My mouth was kiln dry, and no sound came. I even ventured a little nearer the uncouth thing then for a better look. The sight began to appear even more inhuman and unholy, for the thing had a horned head. Before I had drawn near enough to have a really distinct view I came

on the fiddler. He saw me a great deal plainer than I could see him, for he was one of the Petulengros, as we called them—blacksmith gipsies, and had often been at the lodge—and all the gipsies can see much better at night than we can. He called me by name, surprised to see me at that hour on the moor; and when I heard my name I seemed brought into touch with humanity once again.

What had happened was that the local authorities, since I had been there, had put up a signpost—my gallows-tree—at the moorland cross-roads, and Jasper Petulengro, so named by us, had tethered his goat to it. His playing on the fiddle always seemed to send the goat quite mad, and he made money by showing off the performance at gatherings, such as these at Inverness and Portree—"Sae rantingly, sae wantonly, sae dauntingly gaed he." I was not many yards off my straight way home. But they ought not to put up signposts on lonely places of the moor without notice given, and gipsies ought not to tie their goats to them at night, and make them dance to the fiddle.

CHAPTER XV

ULTIMA THULE

THERE is something especially attractive to the fancy about those ultimate islands of our United Kingdom, the Orkneys and the Shetlands. When it seemed to us that we of the Burscough yacht's company had "done," from the point of view of landscape hunters and anglers, all that beautiful West Coast of Scotland, with its lochs and islands, we began to look further on the map, and the northern islands inevitably appealed to us. Coasting up, therefore, and putting in for a night at Loch Inver, the next day we got a good soldier's wind from the west, that took us at a spanking rate up the western side and followed us astern, with all sail set, after we had rounded that terrifically-named headland of Cape Wrath. The day had served us well, but the glass was ominous of rough weather, and shortly we turned into the southward-running shelter of Loch Erribol. In the morning the storm came, and held us there three days, in the course of which we contrived to catch a few fish of various kinds and humble

size by setting a trammel net in a sheltered tideway. On the fourth day the storm had spent itself to a dead calm, no more helpful for our sailing. At a distance from the yacht we spied a great lot of birds gathered on the glassy surface and, rowing out, found that the majority of them were shearwaters. We had been prudent in taking rods and tackle, guessing that the birds had collected for purposes of dining, and succeeded in catching a number of small gurnard, that seemed amiably willing to accept almost any trolling bait we offered them. The birds were extraordinarily tame, shearing over the water, after their manner, quite close beside the boat, so closely, indeed, that three of them at one time or other entangled themselves in our lines and were hauled aboard. We released them and let them go, but one was ungrateful enough to deal the Professor such a dig with its bill, as he was in the merciful act of freeing it from the line about its wing, that the learned blood flowed generously. The following morning the breeze served kindly again, and we went on our way along the northern coast, with the great hills southward making a magnificent but darkly-frowning panorama, the aspect that they presented to us lying all in shadow of the sun behind them. We passed Tongue with its kyles, and in the course of that day made as far as

Thurso, and there lay for the night, running over the Pentland Firth to the Orkneys on the morrow. These mountains of Sutherlandshire, with the sun at their backs, as we had seen them all that day, are not a kindly preparation of the eye for scenery on any scale of less magnificence. The aspect of the Orkney Islands, on the other hand, is not altogether magnificent. There is that fine and singular obelisk, "The Old Man of Hoy," at their south-westerly angle, that is an exception to the rule, and the cliff of the mainland beside him is immense. He is a striking and a grand old man enough; but for the most part the scenery of the Orkneys is not on the grand scale. The islands lie rather low, and after the mountain scape of Sutherland nothing less than Alpine could seem quite satisfactory. There cannot, of course, fail to be a beauty of a more peaceful kind in sailing between the islands, until one comes to anchor in the bay of the little cathedral town of Kirkwall. The cathedral is most curious, with an immense number of round brick pillars within, built, I believe, about the latter end of the Saga time, when they were bringing "the white Christ" to Norway, Iceland, and all the old strongholds of Odin. Of course, these islands of Orkney, and Shetland too, were always being harried by the Vikings. In the Orkneys we did

not have much fortune with the fishing, but probably this was rather by reason of the luck being against us than of any lack of fish in the waters that girdle those islands, for why should they not be fishy?

Fishing from the yacht's deck one day in the harbour of Kirkwall, Bob Burscough pulled up a huge cod, that looked so long, so lean, and so sickly that he took our appetite away from us. We did not care to eat him, and threw him, with a great splash, into the water again, to give him a chance of becoming a better fish. We paid our due devotions in the Kirkwall Cathedral, we played a round of golf on the Kirkwall golf course—for there is a golf course, though only of what the St. Andrews man scornfully calls the "inland" kind—and then, with the dawning of a glorious day, sailed off between the islands northward again for Shetland.

Perhaps few of us who have not been there realise how far north the Shetland Islands really are, how far to the north of the Orkneys, being, in fact, if anything a little nearer Norway than the Scottish main, and in some ways with a closer affinity to Norway than to Scotland. The dialect seems more Norse than Scottish, the prows of the boats curve up in a Norwegian way. These islands, again, lie low, but somehow, perhaps because we had longer left the

majestic glories of the Sutherlandshire mountains, we felt more appreciation for the Shetland scenery than we had been able to give to that of the Orkneys, though in truth it is not dissimilar. A group of Shetland ponies, curiously watching the yacht sail past, was a quaint sight from the boat's deck. We had great luck, too, in entering Lerwick harbour just as the herring fleet was coming in after a successful catch—a busy and very interesting sight. One of the yacht's crew was a native Shetlander, who took us ashore with him to call on a relative whom we found charmingly engaged with her spinning-wheel, working up the wool of the famous Shetland sheep. Elsewhere we saw a great cauldron of dye cooking, but this, I fancy, was rather for the dyeing of some of the tweeds than of the wools, which we understood to be left their natural colours, the white, the grey, and the brown. But of these mysteries we speak subject to much correction. With more confidence we can talk about the sea-trout fishing in the lochs—the sea lochs, which in those islands are called "voes." The sea-trout rise to fly there, in the shallow sea water, more freely than any of us had ever known them do elsewhere. They rose very freely when they were inclined to rise, and yet they were extraordinarily capricious. We could not find that

the state of the tide had much to do with it, neither the weather—so far as we could appreciate the conditions of weather; but, whatever the reason, the fact was very patent, sometimes painfully patent, that after biting eagerly (though, of course, with the exasperating tendency to hook themselves very lightly and break away afterwards of all sea-trout) for an hour or so they would then suddenly go right off the feed, and would not be persuaded to look at any kind of lure again. It was an exasperating business. But, by way of compensation, there was always the hope that if the fish were not biting one hour or one minute they might be the next, and when they were on the rise the fun was glorious. It is an added satisfaction to catch a fish that is such dainty eating.

The sea-trout fishing in the salt water is certainly the best fun that the Shetlands have to give the angler, though there is other fishing for the various kinds of trout, both in the lochs and in the rivers, besides the sea-fishing as more generally understood. But of all these the best, in the humble opinion of our ship's company, was the salt-water sea-trouting.

Of our return journey southward again I do not propose to say much, for the weather broke, and it was not that harmonious affair that it had been as we came northward. In Kirkwall we

were storm-stayed the better part of a fortnight. For three days the Aberdeen steamer did not come. When she at length put in we boarded her and consulted the captain as to the weather in the Pentland Firth.

"Is yon your boatie?" the man of brass buttons asked, speaking thus disrespectfully of our trim-built ship. We said it was.

"Then," said he, "the sea outside's like a wall, and if it's for pleesure ye're going, don't go."

That was enough for us. We took berth southward on that Aberdeen boat, and, through seas like a wall, as he had truly told us, in comparatively few hours found our way to the granite city.

And therewith came to an end, as it seems in the retrospect, the days of boyhood, for the squalid severity of attempting to earn a livelihood compelled me to London on the morrow, while Bob Burscough himself, friend of my boyhood, returned with all that merry company to Skye. We have foregathered since in many and varied scenes, but it was on the cold and unsympathetic platform of Aberdeen station that we exchanged the last words in that association of villainy which had held us in very agreeable bonds for many of the earliest and best years of life.

THE END

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